Neighborly

by followyourenergy

Summary

Funny how you can live in a neighborhood and not know your neighbors, the people who share the same roads, airspace, and hornet problems, the people you see every day. Castiel’s neighbors don’t really know him and haven’t tried to, which is just how he needs it to be to stay safe and alive. His new neighbor, though, throws a wrench into his foolproof plan — Dean Winchester, eternally cheerful, trusting, and handsome, wants to know him, wants to be close to him, wants to be more with him. Castiel is afraid… but when he’s with him, he feels safe and alive in a whole new way that seems more important and worthy than simply existing. But for Dean to really know him, he has to know Castiel’s past. Can Castiel open himself up? Will Dean stay once he knows?

Notes

Thank you for coming to check out Neighborly!

This is a story of healing and hope, of brightness and light and love. It has lots of feels and
more fluff than I expected. (In other words, my usual.) However, the effects of intimate partner violence is a major theme in this work, so there will be references that may be unsettling for some readers. I will warn you ahead of time in the notes. That being said, none of my work ever seeks to exploit for the sake of drama. The abuse is in the past and is NOT in Castiel and Dean's relationship and never will be. The topic will be handled sensitively. Please let me know if you have any concerns. I care about you and want you to be safe and well.
Funny how you can live in a neighborhood and not know your neighbors, the people who share the same roads, the same airspace, the same sewers and trees and hornet problems because of too many pools in the area. Hell, sometimes you don't even know the names of the streets you walk or drive by every day, never mind the people living in the houses that dot them. All of the little details, the minutiae of life, get lost in the day to day hubbub of this thing called living. But Castiel knows a few things. Just enough.

There's the White Hairs Club two streets down, at the green house on the corner. In nice weather, three women and a man sit outside in folding lawn chairs and speak Canadian French, which apparently is different than Parisian French. There used to be two men, but not anymore.

On that same street, there's a guy he's never seen who watches the Red Sox loudly with his windows open. He whoops with joy when they're winning and calls them assholes when they're losing. He displays a “Boston Red Sox - 2013 World Series Champions” frame around the license plate of his Dodge Ram, even though the win was several years ago. The truck advertises his business on its doors and tailgate. There’s a van next to it that advertises the same, and a sedan that has no advertisement.

On his street, three houses away, there's the couple he calls Captain Jerkface and Mrs. Prissy. They both drive luxury cars and look like they can afford to live elsewhere but don't. He looks pretentious and condescending. She looks haughty and aloof and isn’t around much. She probably doesn't know that he's busy boning some blond that looks like a newer model of her while she’s away. Or maybe she does.

Across the street live an elderly, mostly homebound couple he rarely sees. Next to them is a woman he knows as Charlie Bradbury. He assumes she is Charlie, anyway. He's received her mail in his mailbox before and he returned it to hers. She seems to be the only person who lives there. There is only one vehicle, anyway, although there are visitors from morning to evening.

Next door to him there's a man who complains constantly about leaves falling on his driveway from the only tree on the property that Castiel calls home. Last winter, the man pushed snow into his yard on purpose.

On the other side of him, there's a woman and a man who drive sensible cars and seem reasonable and pleasant. They once introduced themselves as Jess and Sam and he has no reason yet to doubt them. They have a dog named Sully. They wave at him when they're out at the same time as him, and he waves back. Once in a while there's an old black car in their driveway. For the past week, it's been there every day.

He lives his life at the same time as these people, who live their lives with as much (or probably less) notice of him as he has of them. His life isn't perfect, but he is alive. He is reasonably content, he thinks.

Until he meets the man with the old black car.
Castiel laces up the sneakers he bought at an outlet store. They were a little more than he wanted to spend, but it’s one of the few luxuries he affords himself. He would rather spend the money on shoes than medical bills and lost work time because he blew out his knees; it’s just good economics. Besides, he can’t afford to be injured. That would make him vulnerable. He steps out the door into the early June morning.

Morning is the ideal time for him to take his walk or run, though sometimes he’ll go later in the day if necessary. He goes before most people are finished their coffee. It’s peaceful, quiet, and most importantly, he’s alone. He stretches a bit before he starts a brisk pace through the neighborhood. He runs without benefit of music; it’s a distraction he won’t allow himself. The air is warming up and the humidity is low. It’ll be an ideal day for his varnishing project for the Palm Beach house. Having his plan for the day firmed up in his mind, he lets himself listen to the birds chattering on the lawns and in the trees. Chickadees and crows mostly this morning, he notices, along with the cooing of at least one mourning dove. He rounds a corner and disturbs the breakfast of several crows; though he means them no harm, they fly to higher ground until he passes. He doesn’t blame them. He understands the need to protect oneself, knows that sometimes it is easier to run than to decide if someone is safe. He envies their ability to fly away so easily. He has flown twice in his life, once voluntarily and once not at all voluntarily. One felt like freedom, the other like hell. Refocus, Castiel. You are here. You are safe.

A familiar face races to his side, and he stops to greet him and to let him do the same. “Hello, Sully, how are you this morning?” he asks with more affection than he’s shown any human in some time. Any adult human, anyway.

“Hey, Castiel!” Jess says as she catches up to the pair. Jess is one of the few people he occasionally encounters this early in the morning. She works odd hours, though he has no idea what she does for work.

“Hello, Jess,” he responds, and wonders yet again if her name is really Jess or if it is short for something. He has never asked.

“Hi! Mind if I walk or run with you for a minute? I want to talk with you about something.”

Her posture is open, her smile seems sincere, and she is not holding anything except a phone and Sully’s leash. “Alright,” he agrees, though he has no idea what she could possibly want to discuss. They are nearly back to their homes, so they walk as their cooldown.

“So we’re in a jam,” she admits. “Sam and I are scheduled to leave for Europe for a couple of weeks for our anniversary. I had a friend lined up, but she had to back out. Most other people we know live too far for it to be convenient for them to come by, or they don’t have enough time. His breed really needs to be active, so they can’t just be let out into the backyard, at least not every time. They need to walk or run. So, I know you’re active and right next door, and you and Sulls already get along well, so I was wondering if maybe you’d be willing to take him out a couple of times a day? You wouldn’t have to feed him. Dean will do that. He can’t walk Sully because he got hurt at work,” she says with a fond roll of her eyes. “I know it’s inconvenient and I totally get it if you can’t, but it would really help us out.”
He doesn’t say anything for a moment as his mind races. Can you be trusted to keep Sully safe? Who is this man she mentioned? Is the black car his? Will he be there when you get the dog? Would you be able to defend yourself if need be? Or Sully?

“We’ll pay you, of course,” she says.

“Oh no, I’m not… sorry,” Castiel says as he returns his attention to her. “Um, will Dean be there?”

“Yeah, he’ll let you in if he can, but I’ll give you a key just in case. The fool offered to take him out but with two broken limbs I’m just worried about him caring for himself, never mind Sully.”

“Two broken limbs?”

“Yeah. My dumbass brother-in-law broke an arm and a leg dirtbiking.”

“Oh.” Castiel calculates his odds. If the man has two broken limbs, his chances are rather good. They stop in front of her house as she makes her final pitch.

“We would so appreciate it, and we trust you. Sully loves you, and he’s a great judge of character.” She grins at him. It’s a lovely smile.

“Alright,” Castiel replies on a nervous exhale that he covers easily enough. “I would be happy to help you.”

“Oh thank you, thank you!” she squeals. “Come on in for a minute and I’ll show you where everything is and introduce you to Dean.”

Castiel puts on a smile and pretends everything is fine. It’s a skill he’s perfected.

Castiel follows Jess into the house he’s only seen from the street. It’s a garrison-style home, and the front door opens to a dining room/kitchen combination. The wood trim, painted white, is plain and was likely part of a contractor’s pack. The wood floors are a light-stained oak. The home is dressed in modern country meets urban décor. Sully scoots by him and takes a long drink from his bowl.

“Dean! Make sure you’re decent and get your ass out here!” she yells toward what Castiel assumes is the living room.

“I’m never decent, you know that!” a man with a deep voice shouts back.

“Get out here, you doof!”

Clicking and the whirr of a small motor grow louder from the other side of the wall, which are soon joined by a crash and a “Son of a bitch!” Around the corner, Castiel sees the motorized wheelchair first, then its operator, who is… absolutely stunning. He swallows the thought as fast as it came.

“Hope you didn’t need those books and knick-knacks on that crappy bookshelf,” the man says to Jess, who grimaces as she sends a furtive glance toward the living room. He turns captivating green eyes on Castiel. “Hey,” he smiles, holding out his right hand. “I’m Dean. I’d stand for ya but it’s kind of a pain in the ass.” He looks down at his legs, one encased in a cast, then back at Castiel.

After some quick calculations, Castiel takes his hand and shakes it. “Hello, Dean. I’m Castiel.”
“Damn, Cas, oughta call you Iron Man,” he says with good humor after Castiel releases him. “That’s some grip. My dad always told me never to trust a person with a weak handshake. Based on that, I think you’re the most trustworthy guy I know.” He smiles brightly, and if Jess’ smile was lovely, Dean’s is… wow. Castiel would gulp in nervousness if his mouth wasn’t so dry. Instead, his breath quivers over his lips before he manages a smile of his own. Everything is fine. Be normal.

“So Castiel is going to be walking Sully while we’re gone,” Jess explains.

“Oh yeah? Cool,” he smiles. “He’s a beast, but I’m sure you can handle him.” He gives Castiel an appraising once-over and a grin before he turns to the dog. “Yes, you’re a beast, aren’t you, Sulls?” The Australian Shepherd jumps into his lap and begins licking his face as Dean shifts the dog’s weight to his uninjured leg, then ruffles his fur and speaks to him in baby talk. “What’ve I said about jumpin’ on the bad leg, buddy? You can’t do that! No, you can’t do that!”

“You’re not discouraging him, Dean. Sully, down!” Jess commands, and the canine leaps to the floor. Dean pouts, but Jess ignores him. “Thank you. Good boy. Show Castiel where your leash is.”

The dog trots to a closet, where several leashes and harnesses hang. She shows him how to use the harnesses and he demonstrates his proficiency while Dean watches.

“You’re a natural. Do you have a dog?”

Castiel hesitates for a split second. “No,” he answers Dean.

“Huh. Maybe you should. Sulls seems to like you and he’d love to have a friend. Maybe they could even make a little neighborly love connection.” He wiggles his brows and laughs at his own joke while Castiel’s face flushes with heat.

“You’re awful, Dean,” Jess laughs. “Alright, so here is an extra key in case Dean is sleeping or can’t get to the door, and here’s where we’ll be staying and when. We leave on Saturday. Can I give you my phone number and have yours, just in case?”

Castiel knows this is customary behavior when one is watching someone else’s loved ones, and the risk is low, so he agrees and turns to hand her his phone.

“I’ll probably be up. I don’t need a lot of sleep,” Dean chimes in. “Takes me twice as long to do anything, anyway. Gotta start early.”

Castiel turns his way, not realizing he’d turned his back to the man — an unusual mistake for him. It’s okay, Castiel. You’re okay. He can’t hurt you. “I will make every effort not to disturb you,” he promises.

“No worries, Cas. Disturb me all you like.” He flashes a silly grin, which makes Castiel want to vomit and giggle all at once.

Clearing his throat, Castiel says, “I should go. I will be by first thing Saturday morning.” He bids them goodbye and walks home briskly, but not too briskly.

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Dean’s bored out of his mind, so he’s been doing a lot of looking out the window from the living room — his bedroom for the next few weeks thanks to his broken arm and leg from falling off his bike in a race in San Bernardino (and then said bike landing on him for good measure). The scenery doesn’t really change much, save for the neighbors who walk their dogs (Sully always
warns him they’re coming) or the occasional kid on a bicycle or those metal scooters that drop you to the ground in excruciating pain if they nail you on the ankle. He slept a lot on the cross-country trip to his brother’s, but now that the pain is manageable he’s up more, and earlier. One morning he hears Jess rustling around upstairs, probably getting ready for her run, so he drags himself out of bed awkwardly and plops into his chair with no grace whatsoever. He huffs as he maneuvers himself with the rented wheelchair’s joystick to the window. It’s a clear morning, and though it looks cool now it should be warming up nicely, at least according to the weather guy on TV last night. Not that it matters. He hasn’t been outside in days. He sighs and stares blankly until something catches his eye from his right.

A man in black sneakers is running at the asscrack of dawn (he thought only Jess was crazy enough to run this early). He’s wearing running shorts and a t-shirt that’s much too big for him, but Dean can tell he has a rockin’ body under it. His thighs look like they could crack his skull. His forearms are toned, the look of someone who works with them rather than just pumping them up at the gym. He hasn’t broken into a sweat despite his pace, so he’s either just starting out or he’s just that cool. And his face. Damn. He can’t see a lot of details, but he loves the tanned skin and dark mess of hair. He runs by, seemingly very aware of his surroundings but not having a clue that Dean is drooling over him. Jess calls for their sixty-five pound Aussie and the dog bounds toward the door, where Jess waits with his leash and harness. She heads out with Sulls, and when he turns to watch them go, the running man is gone.

The next morning, Dean gets up early again and makes his way to the window. This time, Jess is already getting ready for her run, having worked overnight. As an EMT, she has to be prepared to work whatever crazy hours they need. She’s harnessing Sully when Running Man comes by.

“Hey, who’s that guy?” he asks her, pointing his chin to the window. She looks out.

“Oh, that’s Castiel,” she smiles. “He lives next door. Cutie patootie, isn’t he?”

“I guess the fuck he is.”

“So eloquent,” she teases him. “Put that in a card for him, why don’t you?”

“Sorry, but damn.”

“You should see him up close,” she winks. “I think both me and Sam have a crush on him.” Dean laughs at his sister-in-law’s cheeky grin.

“I think I’m gonna have to get to know your neighbors, Jess,” he jokes as he watches Castiel fade down the street.

He gets the chance to meet the man a day later when his sister-in-law calls for him. He’s still a bit rumpled from a couple of days of stubble and pillowcase lines on his face, but his sense of humor is on (as always) when he answers her. He makes his way toward the dining room, crashing into the flimsy bookshelf near the doorway and knocking their books and knick-knacks over. They really need to upgrade from their bargain basement furniture. “Son of a bitch!” he grumbles as he backs up and makes his way around the mess and through the doorway, which is barely big enough for the chair. He mutters something to Jess about her crappy bookshelf, but he can hardly remember what as he locks eyes with six feet of gorgeous in front of him. A quick glance tells him he was right about those thighs, and the arms are even more impressive up close, but those eyes. Blue as a dusky sky and just as endless. He licks his lips and reminds himself to stay cool. He always gets a little goofy around handsome men.

“Hey, I’m Dean. I’d stand for ya but it’s kind of a pain in the ass,” he jokes. The man offers him
his hand and a nod along with his name, and his deep voice, along with his firm grip, make his mouth sever its connection with his brain. “Damn, Cas, oughta call you Iron Man. That’s some grip. My dad always told me never to trust a person with a weak handshake. Based on that, I think you’re the most trustworthy guy I know.” The carrier pigeon in his brain finally gets to his mouth and tells him to Stop rambling, you idiot! He finishes with a smile, hoping Castiel overlooks the last fifteen seconds and the damn nickname he’s already given him. Castiel offers him a tiny smile. Nice, Dean. You’re scaring him.

“So Castiel is going to be walking Sully while we’re gone,” Jess explains.

“Oh yeah? Cool,” he smiles casually, hoping he’s setting Cas (damn it, he can’t help it) at ease. “He’s a beast, but I’m sure you can handle him.” He gives Cas an appraising once-over and a grin, then realizes by his slightly widened eyes that he’s probably scaring the guy even more now. Ugh. He turns his attention to Sully and talks to him so he doesn’t look like an absolute creep. It’s hard sometimes to know how strongly to come on to someone, especially guys, because there’s that “Dude, I’m not fucking queer” response that you can get from some insecure ones. He doesn’t worry about the women as much, because he can usually tell whether they’re into him and if he’s wrong, they don’t generally get offended, especially since he backs right off once he knows.

Jess calls the dog down and shows Cas what to do with the harness and leash. Dean watches Cas harness the fluffy ball of energy confidently, like he’s been doing it all his life. He asks him if he has a dog, but he says he doesn’t. He jokes that maybe he should and that the two dogs could become a little couple, and he goes scarlet for some reason. It’s really cute on him. Then he wonders if maybe Cas did have a dog at one time and it died or something, and now he’s poking at an old wound. Nice one, Dean.

Cas and Jess trade numbers (he’s definitely going to sneak that off her phone later) and Dean assures Cas he’ll be awake when he arrives. Cas turns around (he wishes that huge t-shirt wasn’t covering what is probably a spectacularly sculpted ass) and tells him he’ll try not to disturb him. Dean, of course, makes another dumbass joke. Cas looks at him with this weird half-smile before leaving.

“Smooth, Dean,” Jess teases him as Dean groans behind his good hand.

Chapter End Notes

Just a little stylistic note: In the beginning, the Cas/Dean sections will overlap quite a bit as we get to know the two of them. Once the story progresses, that will change and each of their sections will advance the story more.
Chapter 3

Castiel spends his week on his varnishing project and some odds and ends, trying in vain not to think about the man next door. Dean. Dean, who exuded boyish enthusiasm and a joie de vivre. Dean, who gave him a nickname. Dean, who smiled at him like he wasn’t damaged goods. Dean, who clearly doesn’t know him at all. He approaches the Winchester house (he can call it that now that he knows their last name, which is also Dean’s — Dean Winchester) with trepidation. As he steps onto the porch, he can hear Sully barking and a deep voice saying “Hold up, Sulls, easy, baby” and then “Come on in, Cas” through the door.

Castiel steps inside and finds Dean sitting just short of the door. “Mornin’, Cas!” Dean calls jovially as he raises his uninjured hand.

“Good morning, Dean,” he replies. Sully jumps all over him in greeting, and Castiel kneels down to accept the dog’s unconditional positive regard. Castiel walks to the closet to gather his harness and leash. He slips both on the furry pup with ease.

“You like to run?” Dean asks.

“I do.”

“I hate running. Well, the long distance shit, anyway. Gimme a chance to sprint and I’m all about it, ‘cause that’s just fun, but running a marathon ain’t me. I only do it ‘cause I gotta.”

Castiel nods politely, confused about why the handsome man is talking to him, and finds a waste bag.

“Can’t be doing much running now anyway.”

“No, certainly not. We will be back,” Castiel responds awkwardly. He picks up Sully’s leash and heads out.

He had planned to take it easy and get to know Sully’s rhythms, but Sully makes the decision for him and pulls Castiel with the joy and eagerness of a child let loose in an amusement park. He’s grateful when the dog stops to relieve himself so he can catch his breath. He’s well-conditioned, but Sully’s speed and pure abandon had surprised him. Sully seems to realize that his running partner doesn’t have four legs and he slows to a trot for the rest of the run, which is much easier on both of them. When they return to the house, Castiel takes a moment to breathe and to wipe the sweat from his upper lip. He opens the door for Sully and follows him to take off his harness. The smell of bacon and eggs fills the air.

“Heya, Cas. Sulls run you through the wringer?” he asks as he takes in Castiel’s sweat-spotted t-shirt.

“Yes,” he answers, and Dean laughs.

“Not surprised. He loves to run.”

“That is most evident.”
Dean laughs again. “Yeah. Hey, you want some breakfast? I made bacon and eggs. Damn near burned my skin off doing it, but I won.”

Castiel looks at him in alarm, his eyes roving his skin for injury. “Are you alright? Do you need medical attention?”

“What? Oh, nah. Had some grease splatter on my cast, but I moved my good leg in time. So, breakfast?”

Castiel looks at the pan and the plates and shakes his head. “Um, sorry, no. Thank you.”

“You sure? Plenty to go around.”

The old pressure to just give in starts creeping into his mind. *You’re trying to break old habits, Castiel. Be polite but firm. Say what you need to say.* “Um, no. Thank you. I… I don’t eat…”

“You don’t eat?” Dean asks with a teasing grin and arch of his brow.

“No, I do, I just don’t… I don’t eat animal products,” he says hesitantly, waiting for the inevitable ridicule.

Dean sits back. “Oh. You’re vegan.”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Uh, sorry for offending you.”

“You didn’t offend me,” Castiel assures him. “It’s a philosophical choice for me, but I am not offended by others eating animal products if they so choose.”

Dean relaxes in his chair a little, which is confusing. Why would the man even care about offending him? “So, what do you eat for breakfast, then?”

He shrugs. “Pancakes, oatmeal, omelettes, burritos, beans, French toast, bacon occasionally when I have time to make it…”

“Wait, wait, wait. You can make all that stuff vegan?”

“If you have the right ingredients, yes.”

Dean’s eyes dance in thought until a small purse of his lips and nod of his head tells Castiel he must be satisfied with his answer. “Huh. That’s cool. And you make all that?”

“I do.”

“Wow. I’d really impress the shit outta my brother if I made that. He eats all healthy, too. He’s not vegan but he doesn’t eat a lot of meat. He does those chia seed things and kale and *quin-oh-ah…”

“Quinoa.”

“*Keen-wah?”*

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t seem right.”
“That’s how it’s pronounced.”

“I think someone lied to you. Or you’re lying to me,” Dean says with a sparkle in his eyes that betrays his suspicious squint.

Dean’s teasing makes Castiel feel a little warm. “I have no reason to lie to you about the pronunciation of quinoa.”

“Hmm,” he says, rubbing his chin. “Alright. I don’t know you too well yet, but I’ll trust you on this one.” He points his finger. “At least until you give me a reason not to.” He breaks into a wide smile and a short chuckle, Castiel runs a hand through his hair and, despite himself, a tiny smile creeps onto his face. It feels so foreign to smile genuinely in the presence of another adult human.

“I should go. Enjoy your breakfast,” Castiel says.

“I’d enjoy it more with company,” he winks. Castiel inhales sharply and makes a hasty exit.

That evening, Castiel is surprised to find Dean outside on the porch. “Hey,” Dean greets him.

“Hello.” He walks past to get Sully’s leash and harness, then comes back outside.

“So… I’m kinda hopin’ I can walk with you? Well, I mean, I can roll and you and Sulls can walk. I’d just need some help gettin’ down this one step here.” The porch is low but still has a step that Dean cannot maneuver in his chair. “I didn’t wanna chance it on my own.”

Castiel is frozen in place for a moment. Walk with him? Why?

“I mean, if you don’t want me to…”

“It’s fine, I just… don’t understand, really.”

“Don’t understand what?”

“Why you want to walk with me.”

“You’re intriguing,” he says with warm eyes and a smile to match.


“Well, I think so. So… a little help, here? Please?”

Not knowing what else to do with that information, Castiel nods.

“Probably easiest if I get out of the chair and you help me down the step, then we can get the chair down.”

“Alright.”

Dean stands and leans against a post. Castiel sees right away that Dean’s idea will not work, so he rolls the chair to the edge of the porch, then lifts it and places it on the ground.

“Dude, that chair is heavy. I was supposed to help you.”

“It wasn’t that heavy. Besides, I mostly rolled it. There was very little lifting.”

“Yeah, alright there, Popeye.” He holds his arm out to drape across Castiel’s shoulders so he can
hop down. Castiel approaches and allows Dean to place his arm around his shoulders; he feels the heat of flesh on flesh on the back of his neck (It’s okay, you’re okay). He smells like soap and deodorant and something else — sandalwood. It’s cologne or body spray or something, and it’s intoxicating. He focuses on getting the man down and into his chair and not on his smell or the physical contact or his fear or the tiny spark of attraction.

“Thanks, man,” Dean says when he’s settled. He beams, and Castiel wonders if he somehow swallowed a bit of the sun and it flares each time he smiles. He clears his throat and picks up Sully’s leash, and they start off.

Sully is a fast walker, but Castiel is, too, and Dean just manages to keep up (veering off course only a few times as he fiddles with the chair’s controls). Dean talks his ear off. He learns that Dean is a professional motocross racer and that his injuries were the result of an accident at one of his events. He learns that he’ll be in his casts for another five weeks. He learns that Dean has one sibling and several teammates he considers friends, that he restored the black car he calls “Baby,” and that his parents live a couple of hours away from Sam and Jess. They get back to the house just in time for Castiel to avoid any questions about his own life, which is a relief. He gets Sully taken care of, then helps Dean up the step and back into his chair.

“That was fun,” Dean grins. “Same times tomorrow?”

“Same times tomorrow,” Castiel says with the slightest uptick of his lips.

The next morning, Dean is awake when Castiel swings by to pick up Sully for his run. He makes no offer to come with them, staying behind because “I don’t think I could keep up with you guys running like you do, even on full throttle.” Castiel suspects that Dean has had his fill of him, but simply nods. When he returns, Dean is waiting amidst a mess of bowls and measuring spoons. He proudly holds up a plate with a stack of hot, fluffy goodness. “Vegan pancakes. I wasn’t sure whether to believe you, but I trusted you and looked ‘em up online and boom! Tons of vegan pancake recipes! I looked around the house and we actually had the ingredients to make ‘em, so here they are.”

Castiel is touched. It’s been a long time since someone cooked for him… or did anything for him, really. Still, he hates feeling indebted. “Dean, I don’t want to take away your food from you. Please, go ahead and enjoy them.”

“Dude, I made them for you.”

“Why?”

Dean’s face twists in confusion. “Why? Why not?” He rolls to the dining room table. “Now come on. Don’t make me try this vegan stuff by myself. My heart might not be able to take the lack of animal fat and I’ll need you here to resuscitate me.”

Castiel huffs a tiny chuckle before relenting, even if he is a little nervous about eating something he didn’t prepare. Most people are good. Sully sits between them, waiting for an offering. He takes a bite and hums in approval.

“Good?”

“Very good.”

“Alright. I’m trusting you, here.” Dean lifts a large forkful to his mouth and moans in appreciation. “Damn, those are better than I thought they’d be. I am totally making these again when Sam gets
“Do you enjoy cooking?” Castiel asks around another bite.

“Yeah. Don’t have time for it when I’m on the road, but when I’m home I like it. Course, it’d be nicer to have someone to cook for, but whattaya gonna do?” He shrugs and says through his next bite, “How about you? Got anyone to cook for?”

Castiel once thought it would be nice to have someone to cook for, too. He doesn’t think he’ll ever live out that fantasy now. “No,” he answers. He wonders if he should’ve revealed that he’s alone, but most people have probably figured that out already.

They finish the breakfast quickly, both enjoying it so much they don’t fill the spaces between bites with words. Castiel thanks him and excuses himself to work, not expecting anything more from the man with the leafy green eyes who, for whatever reason, felt compelled to make him breakfast. Yet there he is on the porch when he arrives that evening, open and hopeful and bright and much too much for Castiel to comprehend. They repeat this routine every day for a week, save for the one exception when it rains too heavily for Dean to go out. Since Dean has been so nice to him and he looks so disappointed, Castiel offers to play a game. After that, their evening walks end with Castiel staying for cards or Scrabble or a couple of episodes of *The Office*. It’s… nice, when he lets himself enjoy it. He doesn’t really understand why Dean wants to spend so much time with him. Boredom, he assumes.

The night before Sam and Jess are due home, Dean surprises him when they return from their walk. “Okay, so I tried something and I hope they work,” he says as he takes patties out of the refrigerator. “They’re Zucchini and Black Bean Burgers. I was gonna make these sweet potato burgers but I can’t cut things very well right now, obviously. Oh, and there are fries in the freezer. Fries are vegan, right?”

Castiel looks at him incredulously. “Why are you being so nice to me?” he means to say in his head but says out loud instead.

Dean looks surprised at the question. He shrugs a shoulder. “I like you.”

“On what basis? I’ve told you nothing about myself.”

“On the basis that you haven’t given me a reason not to?”

“I…” — *used to like people, too* — “...um, okay.”

“Look, you seem like a quiet guy, and that’s cool ‘cause I definitely talk enough for both of us. Not that I wouldn’t love to listen to you, ‘cause I definitely would. But you’re a good listener, and when you do talk, you say interesting things, and even when we’re quiet it’s cool. You love Sully and you’re really good with him, and you’ve helped me out and hung out with me, so obviously you’re a nice guy. We both like to cook and watch *The Office* and can’t stand political blowhards.” Castiel stifles a chuckle. “And you’re cute, which is just a bonus.” He grins, likely because Castiel’s face is on fire. He rubs his forehead and stares at his feet until his face cools. “So unless you start treating me or someone I love like crap, I’m gonna like you.”

“I could be an axe murderer,” Castiel says with a serious demeanor.

“Well, if you are, I’m sure you have your reasons,” Dean volleys, which is so unexpected that Castiel cannot stop the short, breathy laugh that punches out of his throat. Dean cackles in response, obviously proud of himself for breaking Castiel’s façade. “Come on, let’s cook these...
“up,” he says eventually. Castiel follows, his smile still lingering on his lips.

“I met someone,” Castiel says a day later, sitting with Mia and sipping tea.

“Oh?”

“His name is Dean.”

“And?”

“And I’m scared.”

***

Dean keeps in touch with his coach, his team, and a couple of his friends from back home in California. Everyone’s concerned about him and wishing him well, which feels nice. He reads, he watches TV, he watches Cas jog by in the mornings.

In the wee hours of Saturday morning, he’s woken by the rustling of Sam and Jess and their bags as they attempt to make their way out quietly (they are never quiet about anything).

“Have fun, you guys,” he calls just as the rattle and hum of the garage door stops. They both clatter around the corner to give him hugs goodbye.

“Thanks, man,” Sam says.

“Have fun with Cas,” Jess says.

“Fuck you,” Dean says.

He dozes a bit longer after they leave, but wakes with his alarm and freshens up in the bathroom before Cas arrives. He’s pretty sure he knows when he’ll get there, since he’s been keeping an eye out for the guy all week. Sully confirms Cas’ arrival with barking and scrabbling at the door. He calls the pup back and invites Cas in. He chances calling him “Cas” again and the guy doesn’t seem to mind. The dog receives a warm greeting and is allowed to kiss Cas all over his face. Dean has never wanted to be a dog more. As Cas gets him ready, Dean makes small talk about running, and he finds himself blathering on embarrassingly once again.

“I hate running. Well, the long distance shit, anyway. Gimme a chance to sprint and I’m all about it, ‘cause that’s just fun, but running a marathon ain’t me. I only do it ‘cause I gotta. Can’t be doing much running now anyway.”

“No, certainly not. We will be back.” Castiel picks up Sully’s leash and heads out.

Dean frowns minutely. Guess he’s not one for small talk. Cas strikes him as… not unfriendly, really. Shy? Reserved? Nervous? Nervous. Yup. Well, Dean knows he can put him at ease with the one thing that puts everyone at ease: breakfast. With some difficulty, he pulls out a pan, then the eggs and the bacon. The heavenly smell of bacon fills his nose as he fries it perfectly. He takes it out of the pan, then tries to drain the fat into a glass jar right away rather than waiting for it to cool. Between being lower than usual height and having one less hand than usual, he is at a distinct disadvantage for the task and he spills some of the hot grease.

“Motherf… shit!” Dean yells as he tosses the pan into the sink and moves his uninjured leg. Luckily, the grease only got his cast. Unluckily, now he has something extra to wash and will probably smell like bacon all day. He has a feeling he and Sully are going to be best buds.
Breakfast is finished just in time; Cas comes in from their run looking like the dog ran him instead of the other way around. He’s glistening with sweat and Dean thinks he looks even better than the bacon, and that’s saying something.

“Heya, Cas. Sulls run you through the wringer?”

“Yes,” he answers, and Dean laughs.

“Not surprised. He loves to run.”

“That is most evident.”

Dean laughs again at Cas’ dry humor. “Yeah. Hey, you want some breakfast? I made bacon and eggs. Damn near burned my skin off doing it, but I won.”

Castiel looks at him in alarm, his eyes roving his body. He wishes it was for more lascivious reasons, but he’s just making sure he doesn’t have third degree burns, apparently. Dean slips into a daydream for a moment, imagining Cas as the sexy doctor before he addresses Cas’ concern. When he offers breakfast, though, Cas gets a little weird.

“Um, sorry, no. Thank you.”

“You sure? Plenty to go around.”

“Um, no. Thank you. I… I don’t eat…”

He takes a bit long to finish his thought, so Dean teases him a little. “You don’t eat?”

“No, I do, I just don’t… I don’t eat animal products,” he admits. He looks like he’s waiting for Dean to laugh at him. He feels horrible now, and he apologizes, but Cas takes it in stride once he figures out Dean isn’t going to give him shit. He finds out that Cas eats pretty much the same stuff as everyone else, only in vegan form, and he makes most of it himself. Dean figures he could probably do that, too. He’d shock his brother, that’s for damn sure, and that alone would be worth trying a thing or two. Impressing Cas is also high on the list of reasons. When they talk about quinoa, he finds out he’s been pronouncing it wrong all his life (or at least as long as he’s known about quinoa, which isn’t that long), and he’s kind of embarrassed, but he turns it into a joke and Cas goes along with it. Or he thinks he does; it’s a little hard to tell if Cas knows he’s joking or not. When Dean teases him about trusting him, though, Cas actually gets a little smile on his face that Dean knows is real. He gets the feeling that real smiles are hard to pull out of him, so he’s pretty psyched that he managed to after just one morning.

Then, of course, he flirts with the guy a little and he beats it out of Dodge so fast that he leaves a Roadrunner-style dust cloud in his wake.

“Well, shit,” Dean mutters. He eats his breakfast and thinks about how he can win Cas over. He doesn’t get the same vibe from him that he gets from guys who aren’t interested at all — either the “fuck off” vibe or the “no thanks” vibe or even the “I’m too polite to say anything but I’m really not interested” vibe. He’s not sure what he’s getting, really. But it’s not disinterest.

That evening, Dean decides he’s tired of being stuck in the house, and he wants to spend some time with Cas. He cleans up a bit, giving himself a sponge bath in the areas he can reach, then spritzes a little of Sam’s cologne on. He rolls up to the front door and decides to take a risk and see if Cas will go with it. He knows he runs the risk of being horribly rejected, but Dean Winchester is an optimist — and hey, if he is rejected, at least he’ll know where he stands. He swings the front door open and wheels himself onto the porch. Sully comes along to watch Dean’s struggles as he spins
around awkwardly to reach for the door to close it. It’s just out of reach, and he has to adjust the position of the chair a few times until he gets it. He flops back in his chair to rest for a minute, then turns himself around to get himself down the single porch step. As his eyes dart from chair to step to ground and back again, he muses that this seemed much easier in his head. He stands on his uninjured leg and wonders if he can manage to hop down while holding onto the post, then drag his chair down, but figures out that he would need his other arm to do that. He sits back down to regroup and to rest for a minute. Cas chooses that time to arrive, which sucks because he wanted to be ready to go. Now he kind of looks ridiculous. They greet each other, then Cas runs in to get Sully’s harness and leash. When he comes back out, Dean has resigned himself to asking for help, which sure as hell isn’t going to win him any points.

“So… I’m kinda hopin’ I can walk with you? Well, I mean, I can roll and you and Sulls can walk. I’d just need some help gettin’ down this one step here. I didn’t wanna chance it on my own.” Okay, that’s kind of a lie, but just a little one. Cas looks pretty uncertain, so Dean tries to back off, but he’s blindsided with Cas’ response.

“It’s fine, I just… don’t understand, really.”

“Don’t understand what?”

“Why you want to walk with me.”

_Is he kidding?_ “You’re intriguing.”


Now he knows the guy’s kidding. He has to be. Unless his self-esteem is that far in the toilet.

“Well, I think so. So… a little help, here?”

Cas nods, and Dean subtly releases a relieved sigh. Popeye gets the chair down by himself (show-off), then lets Dean support himself against him. He’s warm and solid and smells like wood and… something. He has a small smudge of deep brown along his neck, as if he had something on his hands that transferred. And being this close, feeling Cas’ damp skin along his collar, Dean feels his interest grow… in more ways than one. He’s hopeful that his clothes hide that little revelation.

“Thanks, man,” Dean says when he’s settled. He feels grateful and happy, and he smiles in thanks. Cas picks up Sully’s leash, barely making eye contact with him, but it seems shy rather than disinterested. He keeps that in mind as they go.

Dean just barely keeps up with the speed walkers, screwing up the joystick a few times. He notices that Cas can easily get sucked into his surroundings, so Dean talks to him about his career as a professional motocross racer, about the night he busted up his left side, and about his recovery. He tells him about Sam (though not everything), his parents, and his friends in the industry. He tells him about restoring Baby. He doesn’t ask him anything about himself this time around. He knows that Dating 101 is showing interest in your partner, but Cas seems to play his cards close. Dean doesn’t mind right now. He’s willing to get to know the guy at his pace.

“That was fun,” Dean grins. “Same times tomorrow?” Cas agrees, and if Dean could leap with joy, he surely would.

He doesn’t go with them in the morning, instead making breakfast that will hopefully knock his socks off. He mixes up the batter for the vegan pancakes, a recipe he found on the internet and chose because he had all the ingredients already. Sam and Jess stocked the fridge and cabinets before they left, but they bought a lot of stuff that’s easy to microwave so Dean wouldn’t have to
work too hard. If he keeps up this breakfast thing, he might need more stuff. He looks at the mix he’s awkwardly thrown together in the bowl. It doesn’t look too bad, actually. He’s even more impressed when they cook up brown and fluffy. When Cas and Sully return, he shows them the cakes and rambles (again) about how he found the recipe and so on. Cas’ eyes soften, which is absolutely beautiful, but then he tries to argue about not eating Dean’s food, which — really? He wouldn’t make this stuff for himself. After Dean jokes with him about his heart giving out from lack of animal fat, Cas relents. He loves them (or he says he does), and even Dean is impressed at how good they are.

“Do you enjoy cooking?” Cas asks him, and he sees an opportunity to maybe get a little info about whether the guy is taken (and to subtly let him know that he is not).

“Yeah. Don’t have time for it when I’m on the road, but when I’m home I like it. Course, it’d be nicer to have someone to cook for, but whattaya gonna do?” He takes a bite and says casually (he hopes), “How about you? Got anyone to cook for?”

“No,” he answers before taking another bite. *Hmm. That’s good news*, Dean thinks.

They finish breakfast more quickly than Dean would’ve liked, and then Cas thanks him and excuses himself to work, which sucks but Dean knows the guy has other shit to do besides hang out with him. Still, he wants to give him reasons to hang out with him when he can, so Dean spends the rest of the morning and the afternoon looking up recipes and ordering the ingredients he needs from Amazon. When Cas comes that evening for Sully, he waits for him on the porch again, hoping Cas will take him along. He does, and it’s awesome, even if the guy doesn’t say a whole lot. He does manage to get him to talk about bees (“They are so important to our existence, Dean”) and politics (“I find that the louder the politician, the less good they have to say”). All week, Dean makes sure he has a new breakfast ready every day, and Cas eats with him without question. They walk every evening, Dean filling in most of the space between them. The night it rains, Dean is really disappointed, but he knows he can’t go. He can’t get the cast wet and he can’t get tire tracks all over the house — Jess would kill him. Or Sam would. Probably Sam. Dean’s pout is huge when Cas comes to pick up Sully, but he can’t help it. He likes Cas, and even the thought of one night not hanging out sucks.

“I could stay and play a game after, if you’d like,” Cas offers, which floors him.

“Yeah? You like cards?”

“Yes,” Cas says with a small nod.

After that, it becomes a thing — breakfast in the morning, walks at night, games or TV after. Dean’s slowly getting him to talk about different things — nothing about himself, really, but about books and movies and food and what he would want with him if he was stranded on a deserted island. It gives him glimpses into Cas without the pressure of making Cas talk about himself directly. So far, he likes what he sees. He tells him as much when he surprises him with supper the night before Sam and Jess return — Zucchini and Black Bean Burgers.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” Cas asks. He sounds so confused and nervous that it breaks Dean’s heart. He answers honestly, because he senses that being transparent is going to be really important in their… whatever they have here.

“I like you.”

“On what basis? I’ve told you nothing about myself.”
“On the basis that you haven’t given me a reason not to?”

“I… um, okay.”

He explains why he likes him and flirts with him just a little. He grins at him, both to set Cas at ease and because Cas is acting shy and blushy and it’s adorable. Cas responds to Dean’s compliments and confessions with “I could be an axe murderer,” said so seriously that it takes Dean a second to catch up. He finds it so hilarious in its incongruity with who the man seems to be. It’s also his first real attempt at a joke, and Dean feels like he is witnessing something special somehow. But he doesn’t want to say all that.

“Well, if you are, I’m sure you have your reasons,” he says instead, which breaks Cas’ serious demeanor and elicits a laugh so small and genuine that Dean cackles in response. He can’t help it. “Come on, let’s cook these up,” he says, and Cas follows, which gives him a hell of a lot of hope.

“I met someone,” Dean tells his mom over the phone the next day.

“Oh yeah?”

“His name is Castiel. Cas.”

“Cas. That’s cute. Is this Cas someone you’re interested in?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I really am.”

Chapter End Notes

Vegan Cas and bacon-lover Dean? We should probably end this right now... ;P

Happy Tuesday! Next update on Friday! <3
Castiel expects Dean’s interest in him to stop after his brother and sister-in-law return, but it doesn’t. A few days after their return, Castiel steps into the sunshine. He feels the humidity rising already and is looking forward to a dip in the pool after he gets in a few hours of work. He tightens the laces on his black and red sneakers and is able to start at a moderate pace, even more well-conditioned now thanks to his furry former running partner. He says good morning to the birds and squirrels that he passes, listens to the breeze rustling the green tops of the oaks and maples. He wonders how much louder it sounds to their tiny ears. Feeling energetic (and knowing he will be wilting in the humid air later), he starts to sprint, racing only his shadow but feeling playful all the same. Funny how an old feeling can become new again.

A blur of mottled black, white, and tan races up to him, barking with joy, and circles around him as he runs. Seeing Jess ahead, coming from the direction of her house, he urges the dog along with him and stops in front of her.

“He bolted as soon as he saw you,” Jess says with a grin. Castiel bends down to pat the excited dog, who rolls over and demands a belly rub. He complies. “Dean’s waiting for you on the porch, by the way,” she adds. He looks up.

“He is?”

“Yup. Made you something. Muffins. They are so good.”

“Oh… that was very thoughtful of him.”

“He’s a thoughtful guy,” she smiles.

“He, uh, seems to be.”

“He really is. He’s a sweetheart. And he must like you, because Sam could never get him to look at a vegetable before you, never mind make something vegan,” she snickers. “I’ve actually been thinking of going vegetarian. Maybe you could give me some pointers?”

“I’d be happy to,” he says, and realizes he might actually mean it.

“Great! Well, I won’t keep you from your muffin. Muffins, I mean,” she giggles. “Sam called him ‘Muffin’ all last night after he made them. Have a good day!” She trots away, Sully at her heels, and Castiel looks after her before turning and making his way to her home. Dean waits on the porch with a plate in his lap. His interest is baffling, but he looks so happy when Castiel enters the yard unprompted that it makes his stomach leap a little. In a good way.

“Hey!” Dean says when he’s a few feet from the man. He notices the muscles of the arm that offers up the plate, which he really shouldn’t be doing. “Vegan Blueberry French Toast Muffins. Damn, they’re good. I ate two while I waited for you. Had to keep Sam from inhaling the rest.”

“Thank you, Dean,” he says. He sits on one of the metal café chairs that are nicer to look at than to sit on. He could make them something so much better. He peels the wrapper away from the confection and sinks his teeth into it. “Delicious,” he mumbles with a hand in front of his mouth so the crumbs don’t fall out.
“I know, right?” Dean says around his third. “Oh, and guess what? I made Sam and Jess those burgers I made us. Thought Sam was gonna fall out of his chair and kiss my feet.” He grins a boyish smile that probably got him out of a lot of trouble when he was little. It’s cute. *Stop that.*

“You’ve been cooking quite a bit,” Castiel notes.

“Yeah. I like to do stuff, keep busy. This is a new kind of food to cook, so I like that, and it takes me three times as long because I’m all laid up like this, so it kills time. Plus, hey, I actually have people who appreciate it.” He grins at Castiel before saying, “Um, so I know you’re not walking Sulls anymore, but you wanna hang out? I was gonna try eggplant tonight, maybe watch a movie.”

Going to his place means being around three people instead of one, two who are very able-bodied and… *Do you see any red flags, Castiel? No. Have they given you any reason to distrust them? No.*

“Yes. I’ll bring an appetizer, if that’s alright?”

Dean’s eyes burst with light. “Awesome.”

And it is awesome, much to Castiel’s surprise. His appetizer is well-received (“I’ve never even heard of polenta, but damn, it’s good,” Dean comments), and Dean and Jess’ baked eggplant is superb. They polish off the muffins from the morning before enjoying mixed drinks on the deck (well, Cas enjoys flavored water — he’s not going to risk inebriation around them, even if becoming intoxicated is unlikely).

“So I feel horrible for knowing so little about you,” Jess says to Castiel. Between tonight’s discussion and what Dean’s shared, he’s learned quite a bit about the Winchesters — Jess is an EMT, Sam is a physician’s assistant, and they adopted 2-year-old Sully from a shelter when he was a puppy. They’ve been married for three years and they met when Sam moved into her apartment building. Both are kind-hearted people. Sam has “been through a lot,” though Dean didn’t go into detail. Jess is “a ray of fucking sunshine,” per Dean. Takes one to know one, he supposes. “What do you do for work?”

“I work for Chuck, your neighbor,” he answers, keeping it vague.

“He still lives there?” Sam asks. “I don’t think I’ve seen him since you moved in, and I barely saw him before that.”

“It is not his primary home. He has several homes and travels widely. He is in the medical field, like both of you. He invented a medical device that allows him to live without concern for finances, and he teaches about it all over the world, does demonstrations and consultations, that sort of thing.”

“Oh wow, that’s awesome,” Sam gushes.

He thinks he’s successfully deflected their question until Jess asks, “So what do you do for Chuck, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Does he mind? He doesn’t ordinarily tell people much about himself. Not anymore. *Is there any way they could use this information against you? Deciding there is probably little harm (he’s quite good at figuring out those sorts of odds), he answers, “I am remodeling his home.”*

Dean raises his brows. “Remodeling, like, all of it?”

“Yes.”
“Huh. So you’re, like, a contractor?”

“I’m a woodworker, mostly. But I know enough about construction to do the things he requires.”

Why did he tell them he’s a woodworker? Damn it. Be rational, Castiel. What are the chances of it getting back to her, really?

“That’s so cool,” Dean says with his usual enthusiasm. “I’d love to see your work sometime. I goofed around with that kind of stuff when I was younger. Before I got into the motocross thing seriously.”

“Oh, um, well. I have a photo I could show you.” He digs his phone out and flicks to the project he just finished.

“Holy fuck, dude,” Dean breathes. He’s admiring a chunky fireplace mantel that looks like a grand wooden ship against the gray bricks of the fireplace and the gray-blue planks on the wall above it.

“Did you make that mantel?”

“I made the entire thing,” Castiel says with a shrug.

Sam looks up from the picture, wide-eyed. “The entire thing. Wow. This is incredible.”

“Castiel, that is stunning,” Jess agrees with everyone. “It could be in a magazine.”

Castiel pauses. It’s not the first time he’s heard that, and it’s a bit painful. “Um, thank you.” He changes the subject. They graciously follow without comment.

The evening ends positively, and as Castiel walks home, he considers how long it’s been since he had a night out with anyone. It’s been a long time. It felt scary. It felt good.

In the morning, after his run and a breakfast sandwich with Dean (he’s not sure how this has become a thing, but it has), he dresses in a short-sleeved button-down and shorts. He repeats a few mantras: *You are safe. You can keep yourself safe. Most people are good.* He doesn’t have to do it as often as he used to, but for larger outings like this, where there are a lot of people, he prefers the reminders. He finds himself doing them more recently, too, before he sees Dean and his family, because that presents a different sort of potential danger. He backs out of the driveway in his SUV, a beast of a thing that he likes because he feels safe in it.

After his first appointment of the day, he heads to the hospital. When he arrives, he makes his way to the fourth floor, as he does most Tuesdays. He signs in and greets Hannah, the nurse who is on every Tuesday. She is gentle and kind. She leads him into the room, where he settles into a chair and unbuttons his shirt. She brings him the tiny bundle, which he holds against his skin. “This is Abdi. He was just born a few days ago,” she says before she leaves them alone.

“Hello, Abdi, sweetheart,” he says to the infant. “Thank you for letting me hold you today. Your parents love you so much, I’m sure of it, but they just can’t be here right now. They have to rest so that they can be at their very best when they see you.” He adjusts the premature infant on his chest to allow more skin contact. “You are a fighter. You are strong. You will overcome. You already have.” He tells this to all of the infants he holds when he comes. He sits quietly for a while, letting the infant soak in his warmth as he soaks up the human contact. Hannah returns eventually and takes Abdi, trading him for Hope, who is shaking.

“Hello, Hope,” he says to her. She cries almost the entire time he holds her, but he doesn’t take it personally. He knows she has had a difficult start to her life, born drug-addicted and abandoned at the hospital. “Thank you for letting me hold you today. I know you’re going through a difficult
time as your body recovers, so remember that great victories come from great struggles, dear heart. And I know the world seems scary, but like Mr. Rogers said, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ So look for helpers. Look for the good. The more you look for the good, the more good you’ll find.” Her wailing subsides to whimpering as she starts to fall asleep. “Now I’m not great at taking my own advice, but I am trying, just as I hope you will. The world wasn’t always scary, and it won’t always be scary. Remember that when you feel hopeless.” He rocks the little one until she is sleeping soundly, then he rocks her some more. “You are a fighter. You are strong. You will overcome. You already have,” he whispers to her when Hannah comes back. When she goes, he buttons his shirt, the medical tape holding the gauze bandages on his back catching on it a bit.

“Thank you,” Hannah smiles at him as he signs out at the nurses’ station.

“Thank you,” he replies. “This opportunity is truly a gift to me.” He walks away, scanning his environment as he goes, and heads for home.

After lunch and several hours’ work on a feature wall in the living room, Castiel peels off his grimy work clothes and steps into a pair of swim trunks he draped over a chair. He heads outside to the backyard and doesn’t miss a step as he dives into the pool. Cutting effortlessly through the water, Castiel feels the cool, liquid silk against every inch of his skin. He holds his breath as long as possible, letting his lungs burn until he bursts above the surface for air, inhaling life. He floats and closes his eyes to the sun, thinking about the sunlight next door that has chosen to shine on him rather than the burning star above him that has no choice.

Castiel eats and loads the dishwasher after his swim, but still feels restless. It’s rather warm still, and he can feel the humidity rising in anticipation of the heat wave they’re expecting over the next several days. On days like this he usually swims a few laps, as he just did, and then sits in the air conditioning. Tonight, though, that doesn’t feel right. Tonight, he needs to be around others. It’s a rare thing, and usually being with the babies tides him over for another week. But not tonight. He sighs and changes back into the button-down and shorts from earlier, ties his sneakers on, and heads out the door, making sure to set the alarm system as usual.

He sets out in the direction of the Winchester house, trying to convince himself that he doesn’t really want to see Dean, that he doesn’t want or need his company, that doing so would only result in pain. But not doing so seems to cause a different pain. He watches the house and weighs out the pros and cons. Cons: He could be trying to win your trust only to hurt you. He is leaving as soon as he’s healed and he will not be worth the effort. He will forget you anyway. He is safer not knowing you. Pros: He treats you like you matter. He must stare at the house too long, because the door swings open (with some effort) and Dean rolls into view. “Hey, Cas!” he shouts with a smile in his voice.

“Hello, Dean,” he responds, embarrassed that he’s been caught.

“You gonna just stand there or are you gonna ask me out?” he shouts. Castiel knows he flushes a bright red; he can feel the heat in his cheeks. He clears his throat and approaches the porch. “Hey there,” Dean says with a warm grin. “You takin’ a walk?”

“Um, yes.”

“I’ll join ya if you don’t mind,” he says. How one person can contain such hope, Castiel doesn’t know. He agrees. They meander the neighborhood with no pressure to move quickly, no goal to strive toward. Castiel still scans his environment, but now it’s to look out for both of them and not just himself. He wonders when the desire to protect Dean started.
“So what’d you do today?” Dean asks when they turn the corner at the meeting place of the White Hairs Club.

“I worked on a feature wall in the living room.”

“Oh yeah? What’re you doing?”

“It’s a wood plank wall, similar to what is above the fireplace, but in variegated shades of tan, almond, and gray.”

“Sounds gorgeous, man. Got a picture?”

“Not yet. It’s not finished.”

“You don’t have any of it in progress?”

“No. Why would I take a picture of that?”

“Because the process of creating it is just as important as the result, isn’t it?”

Castiel stops, ponders. “I suppose it is.”

“I mean, most of us are works in progress, right? That’s basically what humans are. You never stop learning and growing and shit, so you’re always changing, right?”

“Right.”

“Exactly. If we waited until we were done growing and changing to see how we turned out, we’d never stop and appreciate how far we’ve come.”

Castiel quirks his eyebrows, impressed and appreciative of Dean’s thoughts. “You’re quite insightful.”

“Eh, I read,” he laughs. “Helped Sam through some shit at one point, so I read a lot of self-help shit and kind of liked it, so.” He shrugs, seemingly self-conscious.

“I… like your outlook, Dean.”

“Thanks, Cas.” They walk in a peaceful silence until they turn the corner to their street. “You gonna be around tomorrow?”

“I will be.”

“Come over for breakfast after your run. Me and Jess are trying some tofu scramble thing.”

“Tofu?”

“Yeah.” Castiel raises a brow at him. “What? I can eat tofu. We’re gonna do some kinda fake bacon thing too.”

Castiel raises both eyebrows at him now. “That may not satisfy you like typical bacon.”

“Eh, I like a challenge,” he says with a wink. Castiel is starting to believe it.

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Dean can’t help but be disappointed when Cas doesn’t stop by to pick up Sully in the mornings or
evenings and doesn’t come by for breakfast or Scrabble (despite the guy kicking his ass almost every time). He’d grown fond of their routine and he thought they’d developed something that could outlast Cas’ commitment to the dog.

“What’s got you in a funk?” Sam asks when he gets home and finds Dean staring right through the TV show he’s supposed to be watching.

“Nothin’,” Dean says with a frown. “I’m gonna make supper.”

“You’re going to make supper,” Sam repeats, arching a brow.

“Yes, I’m going to make supper,” Dean echoes with a scowl as he imitates his brother. “Damn. I can cook. In fact, you’re gonna be kissing my ass when you eat what I make for supper.” He wheels away and focuses on making the Zucchini and Black Bean Burgers he’d made for Cas. It’s painstaking work, made more difficult by the use of one hand and by the pressure he’s put on himself to impress his brother, but the results are worth it when Sam bites into his creation.

“Holy crap, Dean,” Sam says around a mouthful of burger. “These are friggin’ awesome.” Every other phrase from his mouth is some kind of praise, which makes Dean light up. He loves taking care of people, and he loves when it’s appreciated. He loves seeing people happy. “What the hell possessed you to make vegan burgers?” Sam finally asks. He knew the question would come.

“I, uh, just wanted to try something new,” he says, staring at his plate with a half-smile and a blush creeping up his neck.

“Bullshit,” Jess teases. “Something’s up. Would this have anything to do with Castiel, perhaps?”

Sam turns from his wife to Dean with curious eyes.

“He’s vegan,” Dean mutters.

“He is? How do you know that?” Jess asks.

“He told me after I offered him bacon and eggs like an ass.”

“You made him breakfast? Ooh, what did you guys get up to while we were gone?”

His mind processes her insinuation. “Nothing,” he says emphatically. “Nothing at all, and definitely not that, so please, please don’t say anything to him. He gets nervous and I’m trying not to scare him off.”

“Aww, look at you blush!” She pinches his cheek while his brother snickers. Great.

“I’m regretting talking to you both,” he growls through clenched teeth.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” she says, though he doubts it. “Okay, so you made breakfast, he says he’s vegan, so then what?”

“So I made breakfast the next day. Vegan pancakes. He liked ‘em so I tried something else the next morning, and he liked that so I kept trying things. Then I tried these burgers one night after our walk, and…”

Sam leans forward and raises his brows. “You went out walking together?”

“Yeah, a bunch of times. He helped me down the step and back into my chair.” He doesn’t miss the look between the spouses, but he expected it. “So anyway, he liked the burgers, so I thought
“You can make these any time,” Sam says, finishing his first and going for a second. “So you guys hung out a lot?”

“Yeah,” Dean shrugs. “But he hasn’t been by since you guys got back.”

“Mmm, maybe he doesn’t know if he should. He strikes me as very…” — she glances surreptitiously at Sam, though Dean notices — “hesitant.” She raises her eyebrows subtly at Dean. Dean agrees. He’s gotten that feeling, too. “Maybe he just needs an invitation or something, you know? To know that he’s welcome, that you want to see him.”

“Yeah. Yeah,” he says, nodding his head and shaking a finger at his sister-in-law. “That could work. Okay. When we’re done I’m trying a new recipe.” Dean smiles and bites into his burger. He doesn’t miss the meat too much.

“Muffins!” Sam shouts with glee a couple of hours later as he dives toward the treats cooling on the rack.

“Hands off,” Dean scolds with a light smack to his brother’s wrist.

“Whatever you say, Muffin,” his brother teases. He calls him “Muffin” all night and it’s annoying, but still worth it. Hopefully.

In the morning, Dean dresses quickly (or as quickly as he can manage) after he sees Cas run by. He slicks some water through his hair and brushes his teeth. Sam is up, wanting to go in early because he’s still playing catch-up from his vacation.

“Gonna be a hot one,” Sam says.

“Yup,” Dean agrees. He pulls the plate onto his lap and makes his way toward the door.

“I’ll help,” Sam says, opening the door and then stealing two of the muffins. There’s already one missing thanks to Jess. Dean motors through the door and threatens his brother within an inch of his life if he touches any more of them. While he waits for Cas, though, the tempting aroma and his nervousness make him swallow a couple down himself. Jess and Sully wave goodbye as they head out, and Dean waits.

Dean’s not sure how to make this less awkward. **Uh, hey, just happened to make vegan muffins and just happened to be here on the porch at 6:30 in the morning. Hey, I’ve been thinking of you so I made you these. Hey, I’m trying to lure you back to me with food.** Dean shakes his head at himself.

He has no more time to think as he sees Cas. Just as he opens his mouth to call to him, though, Cas surprises him by steering himself into the yard and approaching Dean, soaked with sweat and looking a little more carefree than usual. It thrills him to see the smile playing at the corners of his mouth, and he answers with a wide smile of his own. He offers up the Vegan Blueberry French Toast Muffins and confesses to eating a couple. Cas sits somewhat awkwardly on the metal chair that isn’t made for Cas’ six foot frame and compliments him on the baked goods after taking a hearty bite. They talk about the burgers from last night, then Dean steels himself to bring up the real reason he lured him here.

“Um, so I know you’re not walking Sulls anymore, but you wanna hang out? I was gonna try eggplant tonight, maybe watch a movie.” He watches as Cas thinks. He has a pretty convincing poker face, but Dean sees the man’s thought process playing out in his eyes. He holds his breath until Cas agrees, and he can’t help but feel pretty damn ecstatic about the whole thing. They chat
until Cas has to get to work, and Dean smiles as he follows him with his eyes until he disappears into the house next door.

Dean cooks dinner with Jess’ help. Cas arrives just as he said he would with something called polenta fries, which are out of this world. The baked eggplant is fabulous, and it doesn’t sit heavily in Dean’s stomach like some foods do. He likes the feeling of eating well. In his profession, he needs his carbs and protein, and he’s always just downed the rice and pasta and steak. But he’s opening up to other ways of eating, too, and he likes that. He’s always believed that people are capable of change, and he’s always loved a challenge.

On the deck later (shaded, thankfully, by an awning), they have mixed drinks (well, not Cas, but maybe the guy just doesn’t drink) and Jess starts to dig into Cas’ life. He’s not sure who’s more uncomfortable — him or Cas — but at the same time he’s dying to know something about his Tall, Dark and Mysterious. Well, not his. At some point, though, hopefully. Dean learns that Cas is a woodworker and sort of a general contractor, capable of doing all kinds of stuff. The picture he shows them of his fireplace project is absolutely gorgeous. He can’t believe one quiet guy contains all that talent in one hot package. Before he leaves, he tells Cas to come by tomorrow for breakfast. Cas offers him a gentle nod. Dean’s pretty sure he catches a little smile on his face when he turns away.

Cas keeps his word and comes by for breakfast, as attractive as ever even with sweat pouring off him from an extra-hard run. A little while later, he notices a large, black SUV pull out of the garage next door. He’s never seen Cas leave the house in a vehicle before and wonders where he’s going. He happens to catch him returning a couple of hours later and sees him walk down to the mailbox. Today’s wardrobe is different — a button-down and shorts and boat shoes — and even hotter because the shirt fits his body a little better. And oh, what a body. Mmm. He shakes his head at himself and backs away before he can be classified as a peeping Tom. He backs up and parks in front of the temperamental air conditioner because it’s hotter than hell and picks up his Kindle, looking for something to read. He ponders the titles for a while and chooses something by Brené Brown. He’s heard a lot about her work on shame, vulnerability, and courage.

After a simple supper with Sam, Dean parks himself by the window again. Is he stupid to miss someone he barely knows, someone he just saw this morning? Probably. But he does anyway. As his mind starts to drift, he catches a familiar figure out of the corner of his eye. It’s Cas, looking at the house. He’s still in the tucked-in shirt and shorts but back into his familiar sneakers, and his hair is fluffy, like it was wet and dried naturally. Dean likes the look. He watches Cas for a moment and wonders if maybe, just maybe, Cas is a little stupid, too. He grins and rolls to the door, opening it with difficulty because of the angle of his chair.

“Hey, Cas!” he shouts.

“Hello, Dean,” Cas answers, in his usual way.

Dean is so giddy to see him that he doesn’t think (as is his usual response around Cas). “You gonna just stand there or are you gonna ask me out?” he asks. He realizes immediately after what that sounded like and is as embarrassed as Cas looks. Still, he resolves to pretend it was no big deal and that it didn’t sound at all like he was angling for a date. He asks to join him for a walk and Cas agrees, helping him down while Sam, the asshole, watches with a smirk he knows he’s wearing even if he can’t see it.

Talking is becoming a little easier now, and Cas tells him about the feature wall he’s working on. It sounds gorgeous, of course, and if it’s anything like the fireplace he knows it must be. It turns into a discussion that’s a little more philosophical than he’d planned, but it feels right somehow.
Cas seems to genuinely appreciate it, as well as to appreciate the more serious, intellectual side of Dean that he doesn’t show too many people, which makes Dean appreciate him even more than he already had. There’s so much underneath Cas’ surface, Dean knows, and he wishes he could see it. But patience will have to be his friend right now, because Cas isn’t ready to reveal what’s underneath.

Dean finagles another visit out of Cas for tomorrow morning, tempting him with a tofu scramble and fakon (Dean found the term for fake bacon online and thought it was hilarious).

Castiel raises his brows in what Dean thinks is either concern or amusement. “That may not satisfy you like typical bacon.”

“Eh, I like a challenge,” he says with a wink. Cas’ eyes light up, just briefly, but it’s enough to give Dean hope for another day.

Chapter End Notes

Hmm, Cas is starting to open up a little... and Dean, your crush is showing. ;)

If you’ve never heard of Brené Brown, she does fabulous work on shame and vulnerability. It’s definitely worth your time if those are topics that interest you.
They’re in the fourth day of the heat wave that’s crushing the Northeast, and Castiel has no plans except to relax today. He worked diligently throughout the week, likely sweating out several pounds between the heat and the sanding he did. The air is too humid already to run, so he opts to walk instead. Donning a long t-shirt that has no chance of riding up, shorts, and his trusty sneakers, he steps out the door, looks around, and begins his trek around the neighborhood. He stops at Dean’s first. The man is awake and pleasantly surprised (he thinks) to see him.

“Hey man,” Dean greets him. “Sorry. I didn’t make breakfast today. It’s hotter than hell in the house.”

“That’s not a problem, Dean. I certainly don’t expect you to make me breakfast every day.”

“Hey, I wanna give you an incentive to hang out with me,” he jokes with a bright grin. There’s something underneath the grin that captures Castiel’s attention immediately. It’s uncertainty, insecurity, fear. Castiel understands, and he hates to see the man’s soul marred with such ugly feelings, ones he knows too intimately.

“You don’t need to give me incentives. If you enjoy my company, I’m glad to offer it.” And it’s true. It stirs up feelings he hasn’t known intimately in some time — excitement, anticipation, hope.

“Only if you enjoy mine,” he answers with the same emotions playing on his face.

“I do,” he admits, twisting his fingers around each other and smiling at Dean’s casted arm because he can’t quite bear to look in his eyes. It makes him vulnerable to admit this, he knows, and part of his brain berates him for being so foolish while another part throws confetti. When he dares to look up, all the ugly feelings have been replaced with brightness and light. It’s breathtaking and impossible to think that he caused it. Perhaps it is the relief of not having to be alone that caused it, he thinks. Castiel understands that, too, more and more so as the weeks progress. He thought that being alone was safest for him, and that he would be happiest that way. He still believes that it’s safest, but maybe not so much that he’s at his happiest. He never realized that being alone was wearing on him. Something passes between them and Castiel feels like flying — soaring and fleeing both, he supposes, though soaring seems to be winning for once. Dean is still watching him and he feels utterly too flustered and exposed, so he asks, “Would you like to walk this morning? I think it will be too warm later. It’s supposed to be the worst day we’ve had so far.”

“Love to, Cas,” he says. “Just gotta get dressed. Come on in.”

Sam is swearing at something, and a sudden noise makes Castiel’s gut and feet jump. Dean looks back at him. “Sam’s not a handyman,” he says in explanation. Castiel cautiously turns the corner to see Sam surrounded by tools, grumbling. The house is very warm.
“Stupid A/C,” Sam mutters at the window unit.

Castiel releases his breath and feels his heart slow to a normal rate. Now that he understands that the noise does not equal danger, he offers to take a look. Sam gladly slides over. After fiddling around for a bit, he announces, “I think it’s the coil, but I’m not one hundred percent certain of that. You seem to have a refrigerant leak as well.”

“That sounds like a new A/C,” Sam moans.

“Well, you could have it repaired, but it may not be cost-effective.”

“Yeah. Jess has been bugging me about getting central air. I never wanted to spend the money, but I guess she’s gonna get her wish. I hate lugging these damn things in and out of the windows every year.”

“You could look into a ductless system if you don’t want to get central air,” Castiel suggests. When Sam raises his brows, Castiel explains the differences. Sam listens intently, and when he praises him for his work and his ideas, Castiel squirms uncomfortably. Intellectually, he knows he’s skilled, knows he’s smart. Emotionally, though, the old, hateful messages still ring in his ears.

“I don’t know many people around here,” Castiel admits, if only to stop the negative thoughts, “but I do know there’s a man who lives a couple of streets over that works in HVAC. I believe his number is on his truck.”

“Really? That’s awesome. You guys heading out to walk? I’ll walk with you and maybe I can snag it.”

“Certainly,” Castiel says, though he’ll miss the time alone with Dean. He notices Dean behind him now, who quickly turns his attention from his brother. Sam leashes Sully and they head out.

“I don’t know anything about him except that he enjoys baseball,” Castiel warns as they approach the home of the rabid Red Sox fan. He leads them to the home, where the man is packing up his van. Sam walks up to him with no concern for his safety. Castiel clenches his hands.

The man’s name is Benny Lafitte, and he owns Lafitte’s HVAC Services. He is a large man and greets each of them with a friendly smile and a big handshake. Dean would deem him trustworthy. Castiel will reserve judgment. Dean and Castiel leave Sam with Benny and continue their walk.

Dean asks him about his neighbors, and he tells them what little he knows. Dean, a friendly man in his own right, says he’d like to get to know some of them. Castiel isn’t sure why, since he’s leaving once he’s healed, but it’s not his business.

“Maybe you could come with me? They know you more than me,” Dean says.

“I’m sure they don’t. I… don’t really talk to people.”

“You talk to me,” he says with that boyish grin.

“You are… different,” he says, looking down at the sandy-haired man. Dean smiles softly and Castiel looks away and jams his hands into his pockets roughly.

When they part, Castiel continues with the rest of his day, ordering groceries for pickup and getting the end tables ready to be freighted to Palm Beach. He doesn’t understand why Chuck insists on Castiel making these pieces and sending them to him rather than just hiring someone in Palm Beach, but he doesn’t complain. By 4:00 in the afternoon, the heat is oppressive. He thinks about
his — friend? — Dean next door, and Sam and Jess, who must be sweltering. He looks out to his pool and thinks. *They have been kind to you, Castiel. If you wear a t-shirt into the pool, maybe tuck it in and pin it, this could work.* Before he loses his nerve, he calls Jess.

“Castiel! How are you? Everything okay?”

“I’m well, and yes. I was wondering, um… actually, is Dean available?”

“He’s right here, hang on.”

When Dean answers with a smile in his voice, he speaks in a rush, “I wondered if you and your family and Sully would like to come use the pool?”

“The pool? You have a pool?”

“Yes. I know it’s quite warm and—”

“Yeah, that’d be great, man. See you soon.”

Castiel breathes deeply and tries not to second-guess himself. *You’re okay. You’re safe. You can keep yourself safe. Most people are good.* He changes into swimwear, making sure to tuck and pin his large, navy blue t-shirt into his trunks, then runs around the house straightening up the few things that are out of place (save for the living room, which is hopeless thanks to sawhorses and sealant and wood everywhere). That done, he opens his fridge and evaluates his options. He decides on vegan pizzas and pulls out pre-made shells to thaw. Since he was planning to make lasagna tomorrow, he has plenty of sauce and vegan cheese. He figures the mushrooms and onions will suit everyone, and Dean might appreciate his homemade pepperoni made with tofu. He remembers the tofu scramble and fakon they made a few days ago, and it wasn’t bad, though they have a few things to learn. He offered to bring Dean some of his homemade fakon once the heat wave breaks and Dean was pretty thrilled about it. He smiles at the memory.

He’s just finishing plating peppers and carrots on a tray with hummus when he hears the knock at the door. It makes his heart race, even though he was expecting it. He opens it to Sam and Jess, looking like they’ve been sitting in a sauna with their clothes on — which, given their air conditioning situation, they probably have. Dean is on the walkway, Sully by his side. The several stairs are a barrier for him. “Come around to the back,” Castiel instructs them. “It’ll be easier.” Dean wheels himself across the grass to the tall fence in the backyard, and Castiel opens the gate for them. For the first time, Castiel has someone besides Chuck in the space he calls home. It’s frightening and exciting.

“I didn’t even know this was here! It’s gorgeous!” Jess gushes.

“Thank you. I actually have quite a bit to do out here, but I’ll probably wait until it’s cooler.” He shifts on his feet before remembering he is the host. “Please make yourselves comfortable. Drinks?”

Everyone opts for soda or water, so he ducks inside to fetch them. He quickly finds he’s not alone and startles embarrassingly when Jess says his name. She apologizes profusely, and he reminds himself that she’s *not her* and tells her it’s fine.

“I was just hoping to get a peek at that fireplace, maybe?” she asks sheepishly.

“Oh. Certainly. Follow me.” He leads her to the living room, keeping her at his side rather than stepping in front of her. He sweeps his hand toward the structure.
“Oh, it’s even more beautiful in person!” she praises him, eyes and smile wide and seemingly sincere. “Can I let Sam and Dean in? They’re dying to see it, too.”

He swallows. “Certainly.”

As she rushes by him, hand brushing his arm in thanks, he breathes. You remember, he tells himself. You remember the difference between kind touch and… not. He puts a small smile on his face as she returns with Sam and Dean, whose eyes widen as they take in the space. Castiel moves one of the sawhorses so that Dean can come into the room fully.

“Cas, damn,” he says, rolling up to the fireplace. “Wow. And holy shit, this looks great,” Dean says as he turns and admires the feature wall Castiel is working on. He looks up at him with awe that Castiel knows he doesn’t deserve. He hears Sam and Jess rave about it as well, but he can’t tear his gaze away from Dean’s handsome face as he takes in Castiel’s work. Handsome. Shit. Dean catches him and he averts his eyes and clears his throat.

“Shall we?” Castiel says, gesturing back to the pool. They agree but stop to admire the kitchen, which he gutted and remodeled last year when he first moved in. They ask about the project and praise his work once again. The praise is almost too much to take, but only because he’s nearly forgotten how to hold it to himself. He thinks of the babies at the hospital, fragile fighters one and all, and knows he can do this. He just has to reach back and remember. He nods his head in thanks.

At the pool, Sam and Jess jump right in, Sully following. Dean, unfortunately, cannot.

“Can’t swim, obviously,” he says with a pout as sweat escapes his pores. Castiel frowns as he tries to think of a solution.

“You can lie down on the edge and stick your right side in,” Sam says. Castiel is fairly sure it’s a joke, but Dean hangs onto the idea. He looks so hopeful that Castiel is compelled to find a way to make it work. A few minutes, some towels, and three strong people later, Dean is lying on his back, his uninjured arm and leg dangling in the refreshing water (at the shallow end so he can support his uninjured leg on the steps that lead into the in-ground pool) and a small battery-operated fan blowing on his face and chest. He looks like he might cry with relief. Castiel sits by his side on the wide steps.

“You don’t have to stay, man,” Dean says. “I’m fine.”

“I won’t leave you,” Castiel replies. “I want to make sure you don’t injure yourself further.”

“I can’t move. There’s like a one in a billion chance I could get hurt.”

“Well, you might be one in a billion,” Castiel says before blushing and turning away. He didn’t mean to say it like that, though he is starting to believe it. Thankfully, Dean doesn’t bring any attention to it. He doesn’t ask him about the tucked shirt that billows awkwardly around Castiel, either, which is a relief.

Sam comes to take over after a while and Castiel preheats the grill. Jess offers to help him prepare the pizzas. She keeps the conversation light, asking him about vegetarianism and about recipes and substitutes, and he finds he quite enjoys her energy.

“Thank you for having us here,” she says warmly just before they step outside. She looks at him as if she knows how hard this was for him to do. Does she? “I’ve really liked getting to know our neighbor. Dean has, too,” she adds with a grin. Castiel smiles shyly and thanks her. She looks at him for a moment before she says quietly, “He really is a good guy.” Castiel nods and steps onto
the patio to escape the conversation and the maelstrom of feelings that would go with it.

Despite his anxiety about people in his space, and despite the number of times one of them — especially Dean — gushes over something about him, Castiel enjoys himself. When he goes to bed that night, it’s to memories of smiling, of feeling accepted, of Sam’s hearty laugh and Jess’ bounciness, of Dean’s eyes and smile and his hand that seemed to be itching to grasp Castiel’s but stayed firmly in place as he offered a soft, lingering look instead. He deems Dean that much more trustworthy.

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Dean stares at the TV and thinks about his day. It was an incredible one, the best Dean’s had in a long time despite his bum arm and leg and the oppressive heat. It was too hot to cook thanks to the A/C dying on them, and when he saw Cas coming up the walk he felt bad about it (although he was quite thrilled to see the gorgeous man). He was even more thrilled when Cas admitted he actually likes Dean’s company, and he knew he was sincere because he blushed as he twisted his hands and looked away. His own twisty feelings made him smile like a kid with a crush — and, well, he does have a crush, so he supposes that was an appropriate response. When their eyes met again, he knew something was happening between them, something he wanted to hang on to, something small and quiet but definitely there.

Sam’s banging on the A/C nearly ruined everything, and he could’ve killed Sam for spooking Cas so much. But Cas seemed to recover and even helped, which made Dean all sorts of hot that had nothing to do with the ambient temperature. He likes his guys sweet and thoughtful and handy and sweaty. While he was dressing, he thought about that little moment they shared and let it develop in his mind into something quite sweaty indeed. But he knows that he has to take it slow, so he satisfied himself with the thought of getting some time alone with him on their walk. Sam had to go and ruin that, too. He made sure to shoot a nasty look Sam’s way to show his displeasure at his intrusion.

They met Benny (nice guy, he could see them hanging out) and got to ditch Sam, which was great. They talked about Cas’ other neighbors and Dean tested the waters to see if Cas would branch out a little. He has the sense that Cas could use some friends. He seems so isolated. He didn’t get much out of the neighbor angle, but they shared another moment that brought all those twisty feelings right back.

He didn’t expect much out of the rest of the day, really. Cas told him he probably wouldn’t be walking or running tonight due to the heat, so Dean busied himself with reading, catching up with what work-related stuff he could, and sitting in front of the fan while he pouted. Sam and Jess disappeared for a little while to do errands, but they were sweating their asses off right along with him by the afternoon. They all spent a significant portion of their time bitching about the heat.

No one was as surprised as Dean when Jess’ phone rang and it was Cas, calling for him. Jess handed him the phone and made kissy faces like a bratty little sister. He scowled at her as he took the phone, his stomach jumping like a teenager who’s excited that his crush finally called. And he was.

“He wants us to come over and use his pool,” Dean said with wonder when he hung up. Sam and Jess looked at each other and back at Dean, no one believing it, but they rushed over anyway.

To say that he was happy to see Cas in his own environment was an understatement. He’s not really sure what he expected since it’s not technically Cas’ house, but the whole place just said Cas. Plants and flowers everywhere, bird feeders that were clearly filled religiously, chairs and a book, *The World According to Mister Rogers*, in a shady spot in a corner. Dean thought it was very
fitting. The indoors, too, was beautiful, with detailed touches that Dean knew were all done by Cas’ hand. He saw themes — birds, water, sky, earth. He could tell Cas was flustered by all the praise Dean and his family gave him, but Dean couldn’t help it. He saw the care in every moulding, the concentration in every plank, the attention to form and function in every handmade cabinet in the kitchen. It was incredible, and Dean had no idea how the man didn’t know his own talent, his own worth. He should’ve been shouting it from the rooftops.

Dean loved hanging (quite literally) with Cas by the pool, loved the thoughtfulness in his hospitality, loved the looks and little turns of phrase that slipped from Cas’ mouth. He loved the whole evening, really. When they left, Dean wanted to take his hand, wanted to thank him for opening his home and giving them a chance, wanted to ask him if maybe they could be something more. He almost did. Cas watched him like a cat — waiting, curious but ready to run if necessary — and Dean didn’t do it, because something told him not yet. Cas’ eyes and relaxed body told him he made the right choice, and he looked at Dean with such regard that Dean knew then and there how much he wanted to be Cas’ choice.

But he has a few questions.

“Jess,” he says, interrupting the show he’s not watching anyway. They are alone, Sam having gone to bed an hour ago.

“Hmm.”

“What do you think is up with Cas?”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s just…” Dean glances at the ceiling, attempting to find the words. “He’s great, don’t get me wrong. I just… like, why is he so quiet? It’s not like regular quiet, it’s like a guarded kind of quiet. Why won’t he say anything about himself? Why’s he living at your neighbor’s house instead of living somewhere else and just working there? And what was up with keeping his shirt on in the pool, all tucked in? Did you think that was strange?”

Jess looks up at him from her spot on the floor and slides onto the couch. She sighs and mutes the reality show on TV. “You know who he reminds me of?” she asks.

Dean frowns. “No.”

“Think. Skittish, afraid to get close to people, hyperaware…”

The proverbial light bulb blinks to life above Dean’s head. “Sam.”

“Yeah. Sam.”

“Shit. You think maybe?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

He thinks back to the year when Sam was with his ex-girlfriend, Ruby, to the emotional and physical abuse he endured that no one knew about until much later, and only because Dean saw her slap and kick him when he dropped in for a surprise visit. Sam changed schools and filed a police report and a protection from abuse order, but the damage was done. He was constantly looking over his shoulder, far from the happy-go-lucky guy who loved dogs and soccer and campfires with his friends. Slowly, with time and therapy and support from family and some new friends, he began to heal. When he met Jess, his neighbor at his off-campus apartment near his new college, some of
those old fears came back, but she was gentle and patient and he eventually fell in love. Dean remembers the mix of fear and longing present in Sam’s late-night conversations with him, the angst of what if battling with the desire to just try. He sees it in Cas. “Shit,” Dean whispers through his narrowing throat.

“Hey,” she says, taking his hand. “That doesn’t mean you don’t have a chance. I think he really does like you.”

“It’s not that, it’s…” He stops and breathes, swallowing hard. “It’s… I know what that did to Sam, and the idea that maybe Cas was hurt that way, or worse, that he keeps himself so isolated and alone… it’s like whoever hurt him is still doing it, you know? Still hurting him, keeping him away from the kind of life he deserves.” He takes his hand from Jess and rubs at his eyes.

“I know, sweetie.” She rests her hand on his shoulder. “You can’t change his past. But you can show him a better future.”

“Yeah. Yeah,” he says.

“Although,” she continues hesitantly, “he might be reluctant if you’re going to be across the country. Or it could make it easier on him, who knows.”

He hums noncommittally. “Yeah. Though, uh, I’ve been thinking, actually.”

“Thinking? That’s why it’s so smoky in here.”

“Ha, you’re funny,” he replies sarcastically to her teasing. “I’m, uh, thinking about maybe moving here. Closer to you guys, Mom and Dad…”

“Cas…” she smirks.

“Maybe,” he shrugs. “I mean, I was thinking about it before I met him, and it would be kind of stupid to move here just for him when I don’t know if there’ll be an us, but he does add to the appeal of it.” He grins at his sister-in-law. “I miss being close to you guys, and I wanna lay down some roots. Never really felt like California was gonna be a permanent place for me.”

“Well, we would love to have you closer, you know that. California is much too far,” she smiles. Dean smiles back before pinching his brows in thought.

“So, what do you think I should do about Cas? I don’t wanna scare him, but I really like him, you know?”

“Honestly, I think you’re doing great. With Sam, it was just a lot of patience and time. Being there for him, showing him I wasn’t going to hurt him, showing him I’d stick around.”

“Yeah. I can do that.”

“I know you can. You already are. Just try not to take it personally when he’s figuring stuff out. It’s not you.” She rubs his shoulder affectionately as a warm, thoughtful look passes over her face. “It was hard sometimes, but it was totally worth it.”

“Yeah, I hear how worth it it is. Often,” he jokes, delighting at her bashful eye roll before he grows serious again. “I just don’t wanna screw things up.”

“I know. Move slowly, be very clear and honest, and always make sure you do what you say you’re gonna do.”
“Right. Got it.”

“I get the sense that there’s a lot behind those big blue eyes.”

“I know,” Dean says with a determined nod. “And I’m gonna show him how amazing he is and that he’s not whatever happened to him.”

Jess smiles and kisses him on the cheek. “You’re a good man, Dean Winchester.”

Dean smiles in the darkness she leaves him in after turning off the TV and going to bed. So is he, Dean thinks before drifting to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Love to you all (and some sweetness next chapter for you!) <3
Most people don’t remember the day they fall in love. They may remember the day they realized they were in love, but the moment when they actually stepped off the ledge and fell? Romantic bullshit propaganda generated by romcoms and love songs.

Dean gets himself ready for the day like he has every other day in the several weeks he’s been with his brother and sister-in-law — with great difficulty and no small amount of stumbling. Tomorrow he is freed from his confines, but today the struggle is the same. It’s all worth it when he sees Cas, though, because he’s Cas. And because he’s showing Dean and Sam how to make fake bacon. He arrives freshly showered after his run and he smells deliciously manly, like saltwater and that sawdust scent that never seems to leave him.

“This takes a little time but it’s amazing,” Cas says as he empties a canvas bag. “Rice paper is fairly simple to use. The trick is not to get it too wet. The nutritional yeast and smoke flavoring really give it that bacony taste.” Dean smiles as Cas talks enthusiastically. Every day Cas seems more comfortable with them.

Dean can’t really help with the rice paper part, but he brushes the marinade on like a boss. While the strips bake in the oven, Cas cooks up some garlic and onions in a pan, then mixes tofu with some of that nutritional yeast and some other stuff and adds it to the pan until it’s cooked through. The fakon is ready around the same time, and as Sam helps Cas plate everything, Dean can’t help but feel happy and proud of the contented softness of Cas’ face.

“Duuuuude, damn,” Dean moans as he bites into the crispy fake stuff. It’s not real bacon, but it’s good, better than the vegan stuff they bought in the store. His scrambled tofu thing is awesome, too. Is there anything this guy can’t do?

“You must be looking forward to having your casts removed,” Cas remarks, changing the subject as his cheeks flush.

“Damn right,” Dean replies. “I’ll have some work to do to get my muscles back in shape. Gonna be all lopsided not using ‘em for weeks.”

Cas’ eyes float over him before asking whether he’ll be doing any physical therapy, and he figures this is as good a time as any to let Cas know he’s going to be sticking around a little longer. “Yeah, actually. Going to a local place, figure between that and my own workouts I’ll be back on track by the end of the summer. Sam and Jess love having me here.” He smiles cheekily at his brother but surreptitiously looks at Cas to gauge his reaction. A roulette wheel of emotions spins in Cas’ eyes, the white ball finally landing on one.

“Wonderful. That’s wonderful, Dean,” he says. Dean can hear the breathy, hopeful lilt in his voice, and he smiles brightly because Cas is happy Dean’s staying. He’s genuinely happy about it. He thinks. He looks at Cas and simply rests his gaze in the vast sky staring back at him.
“So,” Sam says after a moment, “Cas, did I see you at the hospital yesterday?”

That gives Dean’s attention a new focus. Hospital? Why was he at the hospital?

“Um, yes,” Cas replies reluctantly.

“You alright?” Dean asks, looking him over as his mind makes up all sorts of ailments that Cas could be suffering from.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Cas says with a small nod. “Where did you see me?” he asks Sam.

“Neonatal unit,” Sam grins. Cas’ face reddens as Dean’s mouth drops.

“It’s certainly not what you’re thinking,” Cas says to Dean, his mouth curled in amusement before he licks his lips anxiously. “I… volunteer. To hold babies.”

Sam is still grinning, but Dean hardly notices. “You volunteer to hold babies?”

“Yes. On Tuesdays I visit the unit and… well, skin to skin contact is very important for human development and good physical and mental health and I… so I hold premature or drug-addicted infants or any infants, really. Whoever needs it that day.”

Dean firmly believes he becomes a human puddle right then and there, because what? A hot, talented guy, who was possibly very hurt in his life and who shies away from people, cuddles babies? Dear Lord, he’s a goner.

“God, I love that,” Dean finally manages. “That’s so friggin’ great. You are just… wow. I don’t even know. That’s awesome. I mean, I’m not really surprised because you’re… you, but damn. That’s…” He stops, realizing he’s rambling again, and just looks at the man before him with wonder and respect.

“It’s nothing,” Cas dismisses, averting his eyes but wearing a soft smile. “I’m no saint or martyr or anything. It helps me, too, so.” He inhales sharply before focusing on his plate.

“Sorry,” Sam utters gently, seeming to note his discomfort. “I didn’t think it was a big deal!”

“Thank you,” he says with a gentle turn of his lips before inquiring about how Sam’s work is going.

In the evening, long after he’s given Sam shit for making Cas feel awkward (“I didn’t think it was a big deal!” Sam defended himself), Dean waits for Cas and is relieved when Cas comes by as usual. They don’t bring up the baby snuggling thing, though Dean has had that image on a continuous loop in his mind all day. He tells Cas about Benny coming over to watch the game a few nights ago (Cas had been invited but declined, as Dean thought he would), then about the kid that puked in Sam’s hair (he thought Cas might enjoy that after this morning). Cas mentions that he greeted the neighbor across the street (Charlie, he calls her) on his way over. Dean is trying to figure out how to cheer for Cas for reaching out to a neighbor all on his own without insulting the guy when Cas stops suddenly, and Dean has to back his chair up to see why. He’s crouched over a
bird.

“Oh, you poor dear,” he murmurs to the little black creature cradled in his hand. He thinks Cas told him it’s a starling during one of their walks. “Did you break a wing?” His tender voice and concerned furrow make Dean’s heart clench. “We need to get him treatment, Dean,” Cas says with pleading eyes.

“You got it, man,” he says immediately. He wouldn’t deny him anything. “Bring ‘im over here.”

Dean wriggles out of his shirt to make a soft nest for the bird, then he elevates his chair and Cas places the bird in his lap. They move as quickly as possible to Sam and Jess’ house. Jess and Sam are out to dinner, so Dean fusses over the starling (and keeps Sully’s curious nose away from it) while Cas looks up someone who can help the poor little guy out. He rolls into the kitchen and finds a food storage container. He lines it with the softest dish towel he can find, then rolls back and waits for Cas to finish speaking to someone on the phone.

“The person I spoke to is a little under an hour away,” Cas reports. “I need to take him now. We don’t know how long he’s been injured.” Dean gives him the container and his shirt, just in case his scent helps, and Cas places the bird in the makeshift nest before meeting Dean’s gaze with worried eyes. He’s been strong and confident to this point, easily making decisions and taking action, but right now he just looks like he needs some reassurance.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Dean says quietly.

Cas swallows. “You really think so?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Dean admits. “But I hope so. I think we’ve done what we can do.” Cas nods shakily and peers at the little bird. There’s a rip in his usual façade, a small opening in the curtain where his vulnerability and the pain of something shine through. “Can I hold your hand for a second?” he asks, compelled by the need to show him he’s not alone.

Cas flicks his gaze toward Dean. “Why?”

“Just…” Dean shrugs a shoulder, “thought it might help.”

Slowly, as if it’s happening in some strange dream, Cas extends his hand, never taking his eyes from Dean’s. Dean’s hand moves carefully toward his. When they touch, he squeezes his hand gently, moving his thumb over his knuckles just as he’d rub his hand soothingly up and down his back in a hug. His hand is strong and work-roughened, but warm and gentle, too, a hand that’s capable of hauling wood and carving fine details into it, of lifting heavy men with casts and cradling birds and babies. It’s just as he thought it would be, and it’s perfect in every way.

“I should go,” he says after a moment. Dean releases him with a final press of his hand. Cas’ eyes glisten as he pulls back, flashes a quick, tiny smile, and leaves.

Just before he heads to bed, Dean receives a few texts from Cas, whose number he obtained (by honest means this time) when they exchanged them after the night at his pool:

From Cas 9:47pm: Stan is going to be fine.

From Cas 9:48pm: I’m talking about the bird, of course.

From Cas 9:48pm: His wing should heal nicely

From Cas 9:49pm: Thank you for helping me, Dean.
Yes, Dean’s fallen in love before, but he’s never been able to pinpoint a day, or even a moment, when it happened. But if he ends up falling in love with Cas, he knows with certainty that it started today.

***

Fresh from a shower and shave, Castiel gathers the ingredients he needs to make his “fakon,” as Dean likes to call it with his ever-present cheerfulness. It makes him smile. Dean has taken a liking to Castiel, for reasons Castiel still doesn’t understand, and despite the arguments he has with himself, he has taken a liking to Dean, too. He will miss him when he goes, but that is his luck, it seems.

The morning is cool, the rain last night taking the humidity out of the air. It was perfect for running, and it is now perfect for making the bacon he promised Dean. Later it will be too warm to run the oven. He walks toward the Winchester residence with a smile. He notices the woman he believes is Charlie Bradbury putting something in her mailbox for pickup. She wears a Harry Potter tank top and shorts that look like pajamas and she adjusts her messy ponytail as she turns his way. Without thinking, he nods to her, still wearing that same smile. She blinks (probably in astonishment), then answers with a glowing smile and a rapid wave. He waves back and she beams even brighter before a car pulls into her driveway and she bounces away.

They’ve told him to “just come in” several times now, but he can’t imagine just walking into someone’s house unannounced, so he knocks anyway. Jess yells “Come in!” without even checking to see who’s on the other side. It baffles him.

Sam and Dean are waiting in the kitchen. Jess is just returning from work, so she decides to sit out the lesson and wait for the results. The men look dubious as he pulls out the rice paper, but he’s fairly confident he can make believers out of them. Perhaps they won’t change their meat-eating ways, but at least they’re trying.

The rice paper part is too tricky for Dean to do one-handed, so he mixes the marinade and puts Dean in charge of the task of brushing it on the rice paper, giving it the look and taste of bacon. While the others are busy, he starts the onion and garlic he’d already prepped at home in a pan, then crumbles the tofu and mixes it with the other ingredients. He throws that into the pan and cooks it up. He loses himself in his task, the smells of the food mixing with the scents of flowers floating through the open windows (probably from his — well, Chuck’s — yard). He is, he realizes rather suddenly, feeling content. Not the kind of contentedness you have to convince yourself of, but real contentedness. He tries not to dwell on it, lest he mourn its predictable loss prematurely. He and Sam serve the food and he waits for the verdict.

“Duuuuude, damn,” Dean moans. Both his praise and the low, throaty way he offers it have Castiel burning up from the inside out. He quickly changes the subject.

“You must be looking forward to having your casts removed.”

“Damn right,” Dean remarks. “I’ll have some work to do to get my muscles back in shape. Gonna be all lopsided not using ’em for weeks.”

His eyes roam Dean’s body without his permission. You need to stop that, he thinks, though his heart and eyes and sweaty palms aren’t on board with that plan. “Are you going to be doing any physical therapy?” he asks, then wonders why because it doesn’t take his mind off of the man’s body at all.

“Yeah, actually. Going to a local place, figure between that and my own workouts I’ll be back on
track by the end of the summer. Sam and Jess love having me here.” He smiles cheekily at his brother as Castiel’s head spins. He’s staying longer? Oh God. That’s… terrifying. Anxiety-provoking. A wrench in his plan to keep himself safely isolated from anyone significant. It’s utterly, undeniably...

“Wonderful. That’s wonderful, Dean,” he says, because as frightening and potentially unsafe as it is for both of them, it’s also something he really, really wants. Dean’s gaze rests upon him, undemanding and warm, like rocking in a hammock on a summer day.

“So,” Sam says, interrupting, “Cas, did I see you at the hospital yesterday?”

_Oh no._ “Um, yes,” he replies, albeit reluctantly.

“You alright?” Dean asks, looking him over.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Castiel says with a small nod to reassure the man who is, apparently, concerned. “Where did you see me?” he asks Sam.

“Neonatal unit,” Sam grins. Castiel’s face reddens as Dean’s mouth drops. How does he explain to Dean that he enjoys cuddling babies? He might think that’s an odd thing to do. Worse, he might ask why.

“It’s certainly not what you’re thinking,” Castiel says to Dean, his mouth curled in brief amusement because Dean’s eyes are as wide as dinner plates. Coming back to the knowledge that he has to tell Dean about his activity, he licks his lips anxiously. “I… volunteer. To hold babies.”

“You volunteer to hold babies?”

“Yes. On Tuesdays I visit the unit and…” he shifts awkwardly, “well, skin to skin contact is very important for human development and good physical and mental health and I… well, I hold premature or drug-addicted infants or any infants, really. Whoever needs it that day.”

Dean’s face transforms into this soft, misty thing, with no hint of disdain. “God, I love that,” he says on a sigh. “That’s so friggin’ great. You are just… wow. I don’t even know. That’s awesome. I mean, I’m not really surprised because you’re… you, but damn. That’s…” He stops suddenly and looks at him so tenderly he feels it in his soul. She never looked at him that way.

“It’s nothing,” Castiel dismisses, averting his eyes even though he’s starving for the warmth that’s radiating from him. “That’s so friggin’ great. You are just… wow. I don’t even know. That’s awesome. I mean, I’m not really surprised because you’re… you, but damn. That’s…” He stops suddenly and looks at him so tenderly he feels it in his soul. She never looked at him that way.

“Sorry,” Sam utters gently, seeming to note his discomfort. “I didn’t think it was a secret or anything.” Now Castiel feels bad. He’s sure Sam meant no harm.

“No, no, it’s fine. I just… I’m not really used to talking about myself, hearing praise, it’s, um… foreign.” _And why did you say that? You keep opening yourself up to questions!_

“Well, it shouldn’t be. You’re awesome,” Dean says. He doesn’t know if the man really believes it or if he’s just trying to make him feel better, but it feels good anyway.

After the strange breakfast, he goes home and cleans up the living room, moving the furniture back in place. The feature wall is complete. The rest of the wall space has two fresh coats of Champion Cobalt, a deep shade of blue that offsets the wood and stone and stands up to the hours of light that fill the room. Chuck wants new furniture for the space. He needs to order soon, so he calls the homeowner, his boss.
“Castiel! How are you?”

“Fine, thank you. Did you select the furniture you wanted? I sent you some options last week.”

“Just sent you an e-mail. Oops, no, I didn’t, it’s sitting in my Drafts folder. Ha! There we go.”

Castiel hears the ping of the received e-mail. He puts Chuck on hold and opens it, then clicks back to his phone call.

“You didn’t make any choices.”

“Sure I did. I asked you to choose it based on your taste.”

“Chuck…”

“Castiel. I hired you to redo the house because I like your taste…”

“You hired me because I looked desperate and pathetic. Which I was.”

“No. You were working on other stuff for me before all that, right? I love your work. So whatever you choose, it’ll be beautiful, I’m sure of it. Design it like you live there. Oh wait, you do.”

Castiel smiles at Chuck’s gentle teasing. “This is your home.”

“Yes, and I’m trusting it to you. Get whatever you want. If you love it, I’ll love it, I promise.”

Castiel sighs. There’s no real use in arguing with him, and he really does seem to trust him.

“Alright,” he relents.

“Great! Hey, so what’ve you been up to?”

“I’ve been spending time with your neighbors, actually. Sam and Jess and Sam’s brother, Dean.”

“Oh yeah? That’s great! I’m really glad to hear that. I don’t know Dean, but Sam and Jess seem like great people from the time or two I saw them.”

“They are, and Dean is… yes, Dean is as well.”

“That’s really great, Castiel. I’m happy for you.”

They talk a few more minutes before hanging up. With all the decisions being pushed back to him, Castiel looks at the choices again and sighs as he looks around the room and imagines how to fill it.

He looks forward to his evening walk with Dean, the last in which he’ll be stuck in the casts. He wonders if Dean will want to spend time with him once he’s able to get himself out of the house without Castiel’s assistance. He consoles himself with the thought that he would be okay if Dean tossed him aside. It would hurt for a while, but he’s certainly hurt much, much worse.

Dean is talkative on their walk tonight, but seems fascinated and listens intently when he tells him that he greeted Charlie, the neighbor. It’s almost embarrassing how interested he is. As his eyes scan the yards they pass, he sees something black and frantic in the grass.

It’s a bird, a starling. It seems to be an adult, and it looks like its wing is hurt or broken. He picks it up. Castiel feels for this tiny being whose life rests in his hands, whose only defense is now lost to him. So precious is this gift, to hold someone’s life. He can’t imagine how anyone can hurt another
living thing. Well, actually, he can. You are safe. And you can be trusted, Castiel. You won’t bring pain to this creature. You will keep it safe. He talks to it soothingly before he says, “We need to get him treatment, Dean.”

“You got it, man,” he says without hesitation or ridicule. “Bring ‘im over here.” Dean gives up his shirt to make a soft nest for the bird, then elevates his chair so that the bird will be stable. Castiel places the bird in his lap and they head back as fast as they can.

When they get to Dean’s, Castiel looks up wildlife rehabilitators on his phone while Dean talks to the bird in soothing tones, then rolls away. He finds one and tells her about the situation. She urges him to bring the bird and gives him directions. Dean returns and gives him something to place the bird in. He’s lined it with a dish towel and urges Castiel to take his shirt, too, just in case. He places the frightened bird inside. Castiel becomes a little overwhelmed with Dean’s thoughtfulness and with the pain he feels for the starling, who reminds him so much of himself. Dean must see it, because he offers him what assurances he can. And then, he offers something else.

“Can I hold your hand for a second?” he asks.

Castiel flicks his gaze toward Dean. “Why?”

“Just…” Dean shrugs a shoulder, “thought it might help.”

His thoughtfulness is much too much, and ordinarily Castiel would run, would fly away just like the bird surely would if it could. But he needs it, wants to drink from it like Ebenezer Scrooge greedily drank the milk of human kindness from the ghost’s cup. You’re okay. Most people are good. Are there any red flags? No. He can’t hurt you. He extends his hand carefully, watching Dean, until Dean holds it just as delicately as Castiel held the bird when he found it. His thumb strokes each knuckle, gently, gently.

“I should go,” he says, because if he doesn’t then he’ll stay, and if he stays, he will break. Dean releases him with a final press of his hand, as if to say I understand, which Castiel knows is ludicrous. It makes his eyes sting all the same. He leaves the man and his touch behind, but it lingers on his skin.

The drive is quick, the handoff reassuring. The woman has many years of experience, she tells him, and she feels confident that the bird will make a full recovery. She calls the bird Stan and she lets him watch as she stabilizes the bird’s wing and offers Stan a private space with food and water. She shows him around her facility and he stays much longer than he expects, but he’s pleased that Stan should heal nicely.

Dean seemed concerned about Stan, so when he gets home he texts him that Stan will be fine, then thanks him for helping him. Dean will probably assume he means helping him with the bird, but for Castiel, it was so much more.

In the morning, after breakfast with Dean and a short drive, he sits in his preferred floral-print chair, tea in hand.

“I had a dream about her last night. But it was different. I was different,” Castiel says.

“How were you different, Castiel?”

“I flew away.”

“And how is that different?”
“I flew to someone. I flew to him.”

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, my heart with these two.

Someone asked me about the recipes I’m referencing. I can’t seem to make hyperlinks work, but I’ll plug in the ultra-long links when I can. So...

Fakon: https://www.theedgyveg.com/2016/05/30/vegan-bacon-make-vegan-bacon-using-rice-paper/

Tofu scramble: http://www.cheftographer.com/vegan-breakfast-eggs/

Next chapter: A rollercoaster of feels. You’ll notice that the individual sections will each advance the story now that we’ve gotten to know our boys a bit. Until Tuesday.
<3
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dean wakes in a good mood, and that mood only improves after he sees Cas. They talk about Stan and fill Jess and Sam in, then go their separate ways to attend to their business — Cas to his work and Dean to his doctor’s appointment. As Sam is helping him into the car, he sees Cas pull out of his driveway. Maybe he’s going to the hospital to cuddle, Dean thinks to himself with a smile. He’s hoping that maybe he can get Cas to let him come with him some time. He really wants to see a little one in Cas’ huge arms.

“Well, Mr. Winchester,” the physician, Dr. Crowley, says, “Bet you’re ready to have these off, eh?”

“Been ready since they were put on, doc,” he answers.

“Very good. Alright, let’s not delay.” He explains the procedure and shows Dean on his own hand that the cast saw cannot cut the skin because it vibrates rather than spins. Dean nods as if this is no big deal, but on the inside he is quite relieved. When the last of his confines drop away, Dean groans in relief and flexes his freed arm and leg. Sam snickers beside him.

“All right. I am referring you for physical therapy, which should help you recover more quickly. Make sure you do the work, otherwise it’s a waste of your time and theirs.” Dean nods. “Also, no matter how tempting it is, don’t overdo it. You were a well-conditioned person before your accident, but that doesn’t mean you are invincible. You will need these limbs much longer than the duration of your motocross career, so be sure to care for them as such. In other words, don’t rush it just so you can get back to your work. The body only heals so quickly, and you might put yourself at greater risk.”

“Got it. Be careful,” Dean says. Dr. Crowley squints, then nods. “So, how long will this take?”

“You will likely experience some weakness for a while. Full recovery time can be another three to six months.”

“Three to six months,” Dean repeats, then frowns before he sighs. “Alright.”

“It’s a blip on the radar,” Dr. Crowley says. “A very short time in a very long life, a life made much more difficult if you choose to ignore my advice.”

“Got it,” he says again.

The physician gives him some paperwork on after-cast care and some referrals. Dean makes a follow-up appointment at the check-out desk, and they call in a referral for him to a physical therapy practice affiliated with the hospital. He feels relieved to walk out of the office on two feet.

“It’s a beautiful day, Sammy,” he grins on their way home.

“Glad you think so. Your arm looks gross.”

“Yeah,” he says, picking at the dead skin until Sam chastises him for it. “Not the impression I wanted to make,” he murmurs to himself, but Sam picks up on it.
“Impression? For whom?”

He side-eyes his brother as his lips curl into a shy smile. “Cas,” he says, though he knows his brother knows and just wanted to hear him say it, the little bitch. Sam’s grin confirms Dean’s suspicion.

“I know,” he smiles. “You looking forward to going back to California after PT?”

“Nah, I like mooching off you,” he jokes. “Actually, might become a permanent East Coaster,” he adds, more hesitantly.

“Well, Jess told me.”

“Of course she did,” Dean says with an eye roll. “You married people. Nothing’s a secret.”

“Nope,” Sam agrees with a fond look on his face. “Sorry.”

“Nah, it’s cool. So whaddaya think? About me staying?”

“I’d love for you to stay, Dean. You can stay as long as you want. And if you move out here, even better.” He and Sam have always been close (save for those few years when Dean was a young teen and Sam was a pesky, immature younger brother), but hearing that confirmation really helps.

“Thanks, man.”

“Now, about you and Cas…” Dean sighs and looks at the ceiling, wondering what his brother might say. “I like him, what little I know of him. He seems like a good guy. Just be careful, alright? I have the feeling he’s hiding something.”

Hmm. Maybe Jess doesn’t share everything with Sam. “Me too,” Dean says quietly. They don’t talk about this much, so he treads carefully. “A big secret. Like you did.”

Sam can’t meet his eyes because he’s driving, but Dean’s not sure if he would, anyway. He still carries a lot of shame about the situation and about keeping it from his family, even if he has nothing to be ashamed of. “Oh,” he says. “That, uh, might explain some things. A lot, actually.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Sam says, mostly to himself. “So if that’s the case… okay, yeah, that… yeah. That makes sense.” Dean doesn’t interrupt his brother’s out-loud thought process. Sam’s eyes cloud over and his mouth purses into a tiny, self-deprecating half-smile. “You sure it’s worth it to get tangled up in something like that?”

Dean bites back on a flare of unexpected anger. “Yeah, I think it’s worth it,” he growls before realizing that the comment is more about Sam’s view of himself than Cas. “You were worth it,” he says, softer than before. “You were worth it, and he’s worth it. I’m sure of it.”

“Thanks, Dean,” he says, though Dean can tell his thoughts are far away. He gets melancholy every so often, feels down about himself in a way he didn’t before Ruby came into his life. He once told Dean that when he gets in these moods it’s because he feels foolish and stupid, like he should’ve known better and should’ve been able to do something about it. Dean understands — probably would’ve felt the same way himself — and for a while he asked himself why Sam didn’t just get out, why he didn’t just fight back. He was a foot taller than her, easily, and much stronger. He wasn’t advocating violence or anything, but he just wondered why Sam sat there and took it. It took him a few therapy sessions and a lot of reading about intimate partner violence before he got
it. After that, it was easier to understand the hurt, the fear, the guilt, the shame. He hated that Sam had to feel that at all, and still feels it sometimes. He hates that maybe Cas feels the same.

“So,” Dean says to lighten the mood and change the subject, “gonna help me lotion up my arm and leg?”

Sam glances at him with a mix of amusement and disgust. “Eww, no.”

“Come on!” Dean goads as he pushes his arm near Sam’s face. “Look at it. Look at it!”

“Gross, go away!” Sam laughs as he bats his arm away.

“Pfft, you call yourself a medical professional,” Dean says, grinning because he loves to harass his brother and because he’s pulled him from the edge.

Dean soaks in a bath when he gets home, then applies lotion on his weakened arm and leg. He thinks about Cas and a happy grin slowly takes over his face. He’s so excited to see him, to be able to stand upright and be at his level for longer than a few seconds. He’d love to hug him, too, to thank him for his help the last few weeks and... well, just because. He eats some lunch, then gets out the ingredients he needs to make vegan chocolate cookies and sings to himself as he mixes the dough and plops it by heaping spoonfuls onto a baking tray. While they bake, he strips the linens from the couch so Jess and Sam can have their couch back. He doesn’t feel up to maneuvering the basement stairs, where their washing machine is, so he simply tosses the bedding to the basement and cleans up the living room, taking his few belongings to the spare room off the hall. His chair hadn’t fit through the door. He daydreams about sleeping in a real bed again when the timer buzzes.

“Sweet like sugar, baby, be mine,” he sings as he pulls the delectable treats out of the oven. He’s not even sure if the song is something he’s heard before or if he just made it up. Songs pop into his head often, and he finds himself singing whenever something triggers a song lyric, title, or whatever. It’s a habit his parents taught him. Just this morning, he sang the title song from the show *Hair* to his brother when Sam was trailing his fingers through his mane, combing it into place. Sam didn’t appreciate it.

He whistles as he tidies up the kitchen while the cookies cool. When he’s waited as long as his patience will allow, he bags the still-warm cookies and walks (slowly, with a bit of a limp from weakness) to Cas’ place. He knocks but receives no answer. Hearing a saw, he assumes Cas is in his workshop in the back, a large structure he thought was a garage or a huge shed (which it isn’t, though they use part of it for storage purposes). He hobbles over and catches a glimpse of him through the window. Shirtless. *Hot damn.* He stands there mesmerized for a moment, staring at the muscles undulating under the smooth skin of his shoulders and chest.

He suddenly realizes that he shouldn’t be creeping on the guy, so he pulls himself away from the window and knocks on the door as soon as the saw stops, hiding the bag behind his back for maximum surprise. A moment later, the door opens, and he smiles at Cas, who looks sweaty and sexy and... absolutely terrified.

***

After seeing Mia and the babies, Castiel runs through his schedule for the day. There’s not much to run through, really. It’ll be him and cedar for most of the afternoon. He wraps up his morning with a call to a place in Ohio that specializes in antique barn restoration hardware and another to a place in Quebec City that makes beautiful glass tiles for the bathroom project he’ll be taking on in the fall. After lunch, he makes his way down to the workshop to cut the pieces he’ll need for the living
wall he’s going to build around the pool to replace the standard-issue, aged privacy fence. It’s hotter than the Sahara, so once he’s safely ensconced in the workshop he whips off the too-large t-shirt he slipped on when he returned home and mowed the lawn. He hates the damn things and longs to wear something he’d feel better in, but the length ensures that his shirt won’t ride up and reveal... Castiel shakes the thought. There’s no one to see him here, so he should be safe.

Despite the fans, sweat is dripping down his chest as he cuts the pieces of cedar into four foot lengths with the circular saw. He keeps pushing his safety glasses up because the perspiration keeps making them slide down, and his hands feel sticky-wet under his work gloves. As he eyeballs a piece he’s just cut, he hears a knock. He panics.

*What the hell? Nobody comes here. Who’s here? Did she find me?* His gut wants to hurl itself onto the floor, but instead he prepares. He throws on his shirt, some part of him thinking there’s no true danger outside, while at the same time he picks up the metal pipe he keeps by the door. He attempts to stay away from the windows even though he knows full well that whoever it is knows he’s here. He peeks through the peephole he installed and sees Dean standing there, at his full height and taller than Castiel, with something behind his back. *What is that? Is that a... Shit. You’re trapped in here.* He’s mouthing some song, calm as can be, and Castiel suddenly gets this absurd memory of the movie *Reservoir Dogs*, the scene in which “Stuck in the Middle with You” is playing while Mr. Blonde casually dance around while torturing the cop. *You let him into your head and into your heart and now he’s won your trust and guess what, Castiel? This is when you find out who he is and how screwed you are.* Gulping, Castiel opens the door, hiding the pipe just out of sight.

Dean’s smile drops immediately and Castiel braces for impact even as his muscles contract to defend himself.

“Dude, are you alright? You look like you just saw a ghost.” Concern clouds his usually sunny features. Castiel relaxes a little as his nostrils flare to take in air.

“I... yes. Fine,” he says, attempting to compose himself and not show fear. *Don’t show fear.* He thinks it’s probably too late for that one.

“You’re not fine, you look like you’re gonna pass out,” he says, moving forward and pulling his hands from behind his back. Castiel jerks at the movement but sees a clear plastic bag fall to the ground even as Dean is reaching for him. He flinches, his muscles once again ready to fight.

“Whoa, hey, it’s okay,” Dean murmurs. He places his hands up in front of him, as if he’s surrendering. “I’m not gonna hurt you. I just came to say hi and bring cookies.” He tilts his head toward the bag laying in the grass. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” He takes a large step back, hands still in front of him. Castiel chances a look down and, yes, those are cookies. Just cookies. He feels like the worst person on Earth for scaring Dean.

“No, I’m sorry,” Castiel says as he slides the pipe back into place, out of Dean’s sight. “I... yes, you startled me, but not on purpose. I apologize for my behavior.” He feels his racing heart starting to slow to a reasonable speed. “Please. I’m sorry.” Dean puts his hands down but still watches Castiel carefully, which makes him feel even worse. Castiel bites his lip and shakes his head. “I’m sorry,” he says again. It’s all he can think to say.

“It’s no problem,” Dean says. “We can all be a little jumpy when we’re interrupted, right?” He offers Castiel one of his warmest smiles. Castiel imagines he’s a flower and Dean is the sun, and all he wants is to bask in Dean’s light. He needs it to nourish him, to grow. How could he have ever thought that Dean would wish him any malice? “Can I hold your hand?” Dean asks quietly.
Castiel can feel the tears brimming at the edges of his lower lids. He has not cried for himself in years. For Apollo, who was hurt because of him, yes. And for Dean now, who he scared so much he threw his hands up in surrender, he would cry. But not for himself. Castiel looks at his feet.

“I don’t deserve that.”

“Sure you do. Besides, I could use the support.” He wiggles his left arm and leg to get Castiel’s attention. They look pale and they’re peeling. “Not quite up to snuff yet.”

“Oh. Of course.” He remembers how weak his own leg was after his cast was removed. He gives Dean his hand.

“Would you grab the cookies?”

“Oh. Yes.” He leans down to pick up the cookies, making sure his shirt doesn’t slide off his lower back, especially since he removed the gauze after his hospital visit. They walk up to one of the garden areas and sit in the shade in two Adirondack chairs. If he’d been making them for himself, he would’ve only made one, because that’s all he really needed until recently. But he made them for Chuck, who isn’t a social hermit like Castiel’s become in recent years, so he made two and placed them in a shady area, nestled near hostas. It’s nice to have them both filled.

“Now I haven’t broken into these yet, but they look like a glass of milk would be required,” Dean smiles with good humor. Castiel takes this as his cue and gets two glasses of cashew milk, taking deep breaths when he’s alone before returning to the man who, inexplicably, keeps returning to him.

“So look at the skin on my arm,” Dean says with a sparkle in his eyes.

Castiel frowns in disgust. “We’re eating, Dean.”

“I know,” he laughs, and now the sparkle takes over his mouth, too. “Come on, Cas, didn’t you ever have brothers or sisters you tried to gross out?”

“A brother,” he says before he can stop himself. Dean looks surprised by this information and, well, he can’t blame him. Castiel hasn’t exactly been forthcoming.

“Will you tell me about him?”

Castiel freezes with the cookie between his teeth. Dean looks sincere, sweet, and genuinely interested. It isn’t fair to keep so much to himself when he doesn’t have to, when he could probably share this without harm coming to Gabriel or himself.

“Alright,” he says. And he tells him about Gabriel — that he’s three years older, that he used to be irresponsible but now owns several Cold Stone Creamery franchises, that they were each other’s greatest enemies and staunchest defenders when they were kids, and that he was living in Connecticut, last he knew.

“How long since you last talked to him?”

Castiel inhales a shuddering breath. “A couple of years, at least,” he says.

“You guys have a falling out?”

“No,” he answers. He stares at nothing as he chews.
I think this counts as my supper,” Dean groans with a hand on his belly a minute later. The complete change of subject has Castiel turning toward him, amused. Sweat is forming on Dean’s brow as the humidity climbs in anticipation of another impending heat wave. Castiel is touched by Dean’s effort to soothe him by dropping the subject of his brother; he appreciates it deeply and wants to thank him for his kindness.

“Do you want to swim?” Castiel asks. By the look on Dean’s face, he’s as surprised by the topic change as Castiel was a moment ago.

“Sure,” Dean agrees, a shy smile perking up the corners of his mouth.

Castiel gives him swim trunks to borrow and within a few minutes they’re enjoying the water.

“Perhaps you should stay in the shallow end until your arm and leg are stronger,” Castiel suggests.

“What, you don’t think I can handle it, Popeye?”

Castiel rolls his eyes at the silly moniker. “I just don’t want to scrape you from the bottom of the deep end. I don’t think the leaf skimmer is big enough,” he says, nudging his head toward the long-handled net against the fence. He watches Dean’s eyes widen and jaw drop at Castiel’s attempt at a joke. He used to joke like this with Gabriel all the time.

“Brat,” he laughs. “Should’ve known you were a little brother.”

“It’s not my fault big brothers can dish it out but can’t take it.” He folds his arms, smug.

Dean twists his mouth as if he’s annoyed, but the light in his eyes gives him away. He turns away, but not before he splashes Castiel with a sweep of his arm. He turns back. “Oops. Sorry,” he says insincerely.

“Like hell,” Castiel responds before he claps his hands through the water, directly in Dean’s face.

“You wanna play like that?” Dean asks before doing the same thing to Castiel. Castiel responds in kind, and for the next several minutes they make a game out of splashing each other and swimming away. Castiel sneaks up behind Dean a few times, but notices that Dean never does the same to him, always approaching him from the front in a very undisguised way.

Knocking at the gate to the pool interrupts their game. “Castiel?” a voice calls. Jess. “Is Dean here? We can’t find him and he’s not answering his phone.”

“In here!” Dean calls. Castiel leaves him in the pool and unlocks the gate for Jess, who’s still in her uniform.

“Oh!” she exclaims as she sees the two of them, soaked and smiling so much that Castiel’s face hurts with it. “Sorry to interrupt,” she grins, then turns to Dean. “We were just going to get some takeout for supper. You in or out?”

“I could eat,” Dean shrugs, much to Castiel’s surprise considering how full he was just a while ago. “How ‘bout you, Cas?”

He surprises himself by saying yes, and surprises all of them (he assumes) when he invites them to bring it to his home so they can enjoy the pool. Jess quickly agrees and he takes her inside to peruse his takeout menus of places that have vegan options, warning Dean to stay in the shallow end. Dean winks at him cheekily and he turns away, flustered.
For how terribly the afternoon with Dean started, it ends wonderfully. They eat and talk and swim and have a fantastic time. Castiel realizes, after a couple of hours, that he stopped worrying about whether they were going to hurt him. He just enjoyed himself, like he used to do before life got complicated and frightening, before she came into it. Sam and Jess leave at dusk with Sully, citing early days at work the next morning, but Dean stays and they reminisce about their favorite summer nights as children. Castiel tells him about his and Gabriel’s many camping adventures and it stings a little, but not as badly as when he thinks about it by himself. He walks Dean home, holding his hand because he can see that Dean is worn out and unsteady, and Dean flashes him a grateful smile that will be his nightlight when he closes his eyes in bed tonight. At the door, Dean stops and doesn’t open it right away.

“Cas?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. I know… I mean, it seemed like talking about your brother was kind of hard. So I appreciate it. And inviting us over and stuff.”

“You’re welcome,” he replies, though he feels completely undeserving of any sort of appreciation since he was so suspicious of Dean earlier.

“I, uh…,” he smiles and licks his lips, “I like you, Cas. And I’m gonna be around a while, maybe permanently, so, uh… I was wondering if maybe I could take you on a date sometime?” Hopeful eyes shine at him in the waning light, and Castiel is stunned.

“Around permanently? Date? Oh God, no. Oh God, yes.”

“I…” Castiel gulps as he looks away. “I am not really dating material.”

“Don’t believe that,” he grins, but there’s a deeper, serious meaning behind his words that makes his heart long for him. He hasn’t longed for anyone in so many years that it feels like a new sensation rather than an old one revisited.

“There are… reasons why I’m like this,” he continues. He doesn’t think he needs to explain the this — his strangeness — to Dean. He’s certain the man has figured out how strange Castiel is. “And I’m not… I’m not safe for you,” it kills him to say.

“You don’t want to get involved with me,” he rasps, looking away. “My past… there’s too much… I’m damaged. I shouldn’t even be friends with you. You’re so much light and I’m so much darkness…”

“Cas,” Dean says, and the way his voice cracks shatters Castiel’s heart. Dean’s breathtaking green eyes duck into his vision, full of concern, and both of his hands are surrounded by the warmth of Dean’s fingers and palms, present and comforting and unconfining. “You’re not damaged.” Castiel shakes his head. Dean doesn’t know, can’t possibly understand. “Sweetheart,” Dean says tenderly. “Cas. What happened to you?”

Castiel doesn’t answer. He slides out of Dean’s tender hands and walks away in his flip-flops and swim trunks and a dry but baggy, too-long t-shirt — past Chuck’s house, past the familiar neighborhood, past houses only seen from the window of his SUV, and on and on, until he doesn’t know where he is, doesn’t know whether he’s truly safe. He spends time there, waiting for the bogeymen that haunt his thoughts to manifest in human form, but they don’t come. Eventually, with the sun peeking behind the curtain of his shame and shining its light until the fog lifts, he
walks home.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Cas. <3 :'(

Vegan Chocolate Cookies: https://lovingitvegan.com/vegan-chocolate-cookies/
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

We learn some things about Cas’ past in this chapter. Please check the end notes for warnings if you feel you may need to. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s been two weeks,” Mia says. As if Castiel doesn’t know.

“I know.”

“So how long will you keep hiding?”

Castiel’s sure there’s a greater meaning in there than his avoidance of Dean. He knows her well enough. He also knows she’s right.

He hasn’t seen Dean since the night he walked away. He remembers too well how Dean called him sweetheart, how his hands felt caressing his, how the touch of someone who really cares nearly split him apart in grief and relief and desire. He sighs.

“Is he still reaching out to you?”

Castiel presses the home button on his phone to see the message Dean sent a little while ago:

From Dean 8:24am: Good morning. :)

“Yes. Every day,” Castiel smiles.

“What warning signs do you see with him?”

His answer is quick, certain. “None. Absolutely none.”

“So this is all about you. Which means you can change it. That’s a good thing, Castiel.”

“He’s going to be disgusted by me,” he murmurs mournfully.

“Is that consistent with who he is as a person? With what you’ve seen?”

“No,” Castiel admits.

“Is this about your disgust with yourself?” she asks gently.

“Yes,” he whispers.

“Who’s at fault for the pain you endured?”

“She is,” Castiel says, watching the robins and sparrows in the tree outside Mia’s window.

“Where does the disgust belong?”
“On her.”

“Where do you think Dean will place that disgust?”

Castiel exhales heavily. “On her. Probably,” he answers. She hums. The silence lingers for a long stretch. He knows she can wait it out. “But I’m broken,” he whispers finally.

“So you say. And what does Dean do with broken things?” He lifts his eyes to hers. “Broken legs, arms. Birds with broken wings.”

“He… tries to help them,” Castiel says with trembling lips. “Does everything within his power to help them heal.”

“Yes. Does that seem consistent with his character?” When Castiel nods, she continues, “And would you know what to do if his personality suddenly changed?” He nods again. “And how many people have you met like April?”

Castiel shakes his head. “None.”

“So maybe she’s the exception and not the rule. Maybe most of the world is like Dean.”

Castiel licks his lips as he watches a chickadee land on a branch. “I want so badly to be unafraid. To be brave.”

“You can’t be unafraid and brave at the same time. Being brave is being afraid and forging ahead even with that fear. Truthfully, Castiel, life is much more about being brave than it is about being unafraid.”

He nods his head and shifts his tea to the small table next to him. “What if he doesn’t want me?”

“What are the messages he’s been giving you since you’ve known him?”

Castiel shakes his head with a tiny smile, both because she already knows and because of the content and nature of the messages. His soft eyes. His wide grin. His gentle hands. I like you. I want to date you. I still want to date you even if you need time to yourself right now. I hope you’re okay. I’m here for you when you’re ready. Please forgive me if I pushed you too far. I care so much about you.

He rubs his eyes.

“Okay. Okay. Okay,” he replies, softer and breathier each time. You can do this, Castiel.

He stops at the hospital to volunteer, both because it’s his usual day and because he feels the urge to nurture. Twins Kaylee and Haylee are first. He holds them together so they each know their sister is just a breath away. “Hello, Kaylee. Hello, Haylee. Thank you for letting me hold you both today. You are both so wonderful, unique in your own ways and yet sharing something that makes you stronger together. Confide in each other. Trust each other. Let no one tear you apart.” He thinks about his brother as he rocks them for a while, leaves them with his usual thought, and trades them for Anil, a boy with Down Syndrome. “Hello, Anil,” he rumbles. “Thank you for letting me hold you today. I want you to know that you are perfect just the way you are, and don’t let anyone tell you differently. Your life might be different than others’ lives, but that doesn’t make it bad. You have a life worth living, and you are worthy of all the love you can hold. And believe me, the human heart can hold more than it seems.” Anil is awake the entire time Castiel holds him, and he gazes at him like he understands. Castiel hopes he does.

“One more,” Hannah says to Castiel as he gives Anil his parting words. “This is Christian.”
Christian is small and underweight, but not premature as far as Castiel can see. His thigh is bound in a brace. “Spiral fracture,” she explains. He notes bruises and closes his eyes to the rush of pain. He knows what happened to this child and he is sick with it. “Oh, Christian,” he says, snuggling the boy close to his heart. Christian doesn’t cry; instead, he stares blankly. “Oh, sweet baby boy,” Castiel murmurs again, his tears spilling from his eyes for the infant. He rocks him gently in the chair, making sure the boy feels comfortable and safe. “Thank you. Thank you for letting me hold you. Your soul is so beautiful. You didn’t deserve what happened to you. Don’t ever, ever believe that you did.” He rubs circles into the baby’s back, careful to avoid his calluses and use only the softest part of his hand. He spends a long time with Christian, murmuring love into his ear. Hannah comes in an hour or so later and marvels at what she sees.

“He’s asleep. Oh, you are a miracle worker,” she says. “He’s barely slept since he arrived, poor little one. Like he’s looking out for something.”

Castiel understands the feeling. He stands, the exhausted infant nestled against his shoulder, and asks Hannah for just one more minute. She complies and waits outside the glassed wall.

“Christian, sweetheart,” he murmurs, “look for the people who love you, the people who care. Don’t carry the pain and bitterness of your current situation into the rest of your life. You have so much potential and so much life to live. You are worthy of love and light.” He snuggles him one more time, his large hand eclipsing the back of the infant’s head. “Maybe we both are.” He brings the baby into the crook of his arm as he sleeps on. “You are a fighter. You are strong. You will overcome. You already have.” He nods through the glass to Hannah, who thanks him and doesn’t mention the tear tracks down his face. He, in turn, thanks her and doesn’t mention her glossy eyes.

You are a fighter. You are strong. You will overcome. You already have. The words echo in his mind as he knocks on Dean’s door.

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It’s been a miserable couple of weeks. The PT has been slow going, he’s getting shit from his people about getting back on the circuit, and he hasn’t had Cas to talk to. It sucks.

“Be patient, sweetie,” Jess encourages him. “I know it’s hard, but keep reaching out and letting him know you’re there for him.”

“I know, and I will, but I can’t help but think I screwed up royally, Jess,” he moans.

“No, you just brought it out into the open. Listen, people get good at keeping secrets, okay? And this is a huge one, if it’s what we think it is. Imagine having your worst moment out there for the world to know. And your worst moment probably doesn’t compare.”

“Yeah. You’re right,” he sniffs.

“He’s worth it, though, right?”

Dean nods, a faraway look in his eyes. “Yeah.”

The end of July is brutal, with soaring temperatures and humidity. Even Sully is lethargic, preferring to stay in the house in the air conditioning, which hums along nicely now thanks to Benny. He’s hung out with Benny a couple of times over the last two weeks, but he knows he hasn’t been great company. Luckily, watching baseball doesn’t take a lot of social skills.

He thinks of Cas often — the blue sky of his eyes, the weathered wood of his hands, the seashell crescent of his smile — and he misses him.
“You’re a wonderful man,” his mom tells him. “Anyone would be lucky to have you. And if he won’t give you a chance, he’s not worth it.” She means well but she doesn’t know the story, doesn’t know just how hard it might be for Cas to give him a chance. He thanks her anyway.

It’s Tuesday, and Dean knows that Cas is probably at the hospital today. He knows his routine well now, so well that its absence feels a little like a death. Which is stupid, he thinks, but no less true despite its foolishness. He loses himself in his latest book and tries not to think about it.

Sully barks and whines at the door

“You just went out a little while ago, man,” he chides the dog with good humor. He opens the door and expects Sully to bound out, which he does — straight into Cas. Dean gapes, thrilled and optimistic and apprehensive.

“Hello, Dean,” he says, straightening up from his dog-greeting crouch. He’s wearing an extra-long Hawaiian-print shirt, shorts, and boat shoes. He looks drawn, sad, yet there’s a spark of something that gives Dean hope. He is beautiful. “I’m sorry,” he says, voice cracking as he looks away. It’s not the aversion of insincerity or deceit; it’s the falling gaze of shame. Dean says the only thing that feels right just then.

“Can I hold your hand, Cas?”

His hands are folded tightly to his chest. He unfolds one arm, offering his hand without looking up, but looking at their joined hands when Dean grasps it. He holds his hand and waits, not caring that the heat is seeping into the house or that the dog is waiting expectantly for them to play or that the snobby neighbor from down the street drives by in his pretentious car.

“I would not make a good boyfriend, Dean.”

“I disagree.”

“I’m married,” Cas says.

Dean stills, waiting for more even as his stomach churns. *Married.* That’s not what he expected. When nothing more comes, Dean says, “Okay.” Cas looks up. He works hard to keep his face neutral as he says, “Come in.” Cas steps into the house and stands there, lost but still holding Dean’s hand. Dean closes the door, leads him to the couch, sits with him, and waits.

“I am technically married,” he says eventually, reiterating his last statement.

“You left?”

Cas nods and Dean nods in response. He lets the information hang in the air before he asks, “Why’d you leave?”

“So I would not end up technically dead,” Cas says without humor. Dean’s heart and lungs seize for a moment as time seems to stop. *Dead.* He knows, just by Cas’ blank eyes, that he is completely serious.

“Tell me?” he asks when he can finally muster a breath. Cas musters one too and plunges in.

“We met at a friend’s party. My boyfriend and I had just broken up, and she nursed me through it. I was weak, and hurting, and we drank and I slept with her. She seemed like a perfectly nice person at first, but I knew she was a rebound relationship for me and within a few weeks, I tried to break it off. That’s when she told me she was pregnant and insisted we get married because she didn’t want
the baby born out of wedlock. It was a stupid decision but I wanted to do the right thing, so we married at the city clerk’s office and I moved into her home.

“She was controlling from the start. She insisted that she needed to know where I was at all times because she might need me due to the baby. Of course, I tried to be there for her. Soon she said that she was sick and wanted me to work from home so I could care for her. I was just starting to make a name for myself within my company, even had my work featured in a magazine, which is a big deal for a young person just starting out. I loved my job, but I couldn’t do it from home and she was insistent. So I quit and started working for myself so that I could be home when I needed to be. A few of my contacts followed me, including Chuck, so I had some work right away, at least.” He sighs and continues, “She liked me working from home because she could keep an eye on me. She came to all of my new client meetings to make sure I wasn’t attracted to the men or women who were hiring me. She yelled at me if I stayed at the store too long or if I used too much gasoline or if I ran a quick errand before coming home. She accused me of cheating multiple times. I assumed perhaps the pregnancy hormones were making her feel more vulnerable, so I tried to reassure her as much as I could. Within a few weeks, just as she should’ve started showing, she said she lost the baby.”

Dean aches for Cas already, and he’s sure he hasn’t heard the half of it.

“Eventually things got worse. She was angry all the time and lashing out at me. I told her I was concerned for her and offered to get her some help. She refused and blamed everything on me. When her verbal assaults became too much, I told her I wanted to leave. She told me she was pregnant again. I told her that I would be happy to help her raise the baby, but not together. She—” Cas takes a breath and continues, “She punched herself in the stomach several times. When I tried to stop her, she threatened to throw herself down the stairs and tell the police that I did it. I just… gave in after that, for a while. I didn’t want her harming the baby or herself, so I took whatever she dished out, did whatever she asked. By the time she said she lost the second baby, I felt trapped and hopeless. It got… bad. I stopped seeing my friends and family out of fear that she would harm them if they knew what was happening. My work was my only solace, but even that was a struggle. And then… then it got really, really bad. She did horrible things.”

Cas tells the story of abuse with a neutral expression, eyes fixed on some point across the room and voice monotone. Dean is on the edge of tears.

“After one particularly… um, bad situation, she brought home a dog, a beautiful little Bichon Frise that I named Apollo because he brought sunshine to my life. It was difficult at first, because I had to care for him while I was, um, physically limited, but he was worth it. I thought perhaps she realized that she’d gone too far and was trying to make up for it somehow, but that wasn’t the case.” Cas’ hand begins to shake in his; Dean covers it with his free hand and squeezes gently in reassurance.

“One day she was angry because I took too long with Apollo at the groomer. She accused me of cheating, told me I took so long because I was…” he sighs, “fucking our groomer. I told her I wasn’t, but she ripped Apollo from my arms and…”

Cas stops and tears hover heavily in his eyes as he holds a fist to his mouth. Dean feels so helpless. His lashes carry their own tears; his jaw aches as he restrains his sobs.

“She… she threw him across the room,” he says brokenly, “and said if I wanted to be a dirty dog like Apollo then I could sleep outside like one. Then she told me that if I wasn’t out on the porch in the morning like a good boy, she would... kill him. She would’ve killed him because of me.”

Cas bursts like a volcano, hot tears spurting endlessly from a distorted, reddened face. He rocks
himself, his shoulders heaving and his hands clutching his hair painfully between his fingers. Dean yearns to hold him but isn’t sure if touching him will make things better or worse. Instead, he calls Sully over. Sully seems to understand what is being requested of him, and he jumps onto the couch and lies down, resting his head on Cas’ lap. Cas accepts the affectionate touch of the dog and, once he calms, the affectionate touch of Dean’s hand when he offers it once again.

“I was so shocked because she’d never been cruel to him. I never thought she’d hurt him, but when that happened I knew she was perfectly capable of killing him. And I knew she was capable of killing me. She’d already proven it.” Dean frowns, thinking he missed something, but then assumes Cas didn’t share that with him. He could hardly blame him. “I welcomed sleeping outdoors, away from her, even though the nights were still cool then. I checked Apollo over and he seemed scared but okay. I covered him with my body to keep him warm and I made a plan. In the morning, she said that she forgave me and was going to go shopping for new makeup and a new dress, and that she would make reservations at the steakhouse she loved.” Dean makes an incredulous, disgusted face that Cas doesn’t see. “When she left I packed what I could carry, took what papers and contacts I thought I would need, and smashed my phone since she would use it to track me if I took it. Apollo and I walked a few streets over and I called a taxi from a diner. I went to the bank and closed out my business account, took out the money I’d hidden in a safe deposit box she didn’t know about, then brought Apollo to Garth, the groomer, and begged him to keep him. He agreed and said he’d take him home so if April came by, there’d be no evidence that he was there. Such a good man, protecting him better than I could.” He sniffs and continues, “The taxi took me to the bus station and I just picked the next bus and left. I ended up in New Haven, Connecticut. I bought a cheap phone and called my clients. I told them I couldn’t finish their projects but I’d send them back their money, which I did. When I called Chuck, he was so disappointed that he asked to meet with me in person. I only agreed because he’d been so kind to me. When he saw me, he didn’t even ask why I left New York or why I looked like I’d been sleeping outside. He offered me a job at his house in Maine. And here I am.”

For several minutes, the only sounds are Sully’s snuffling breaths and the hum of the air conditioning system. Dean has no idea what to say. What can he say? He knows Cas gave him the abridged version of events, knows that “horrible things” probably encompasses so much more than he can imagine. He understands why Cas hides from people. Dean has the urge to hide him too, to wrap him in his arms and keep him safe from harm. Yet he knows Cas is stronger than that, knows Cas has the ability to move past his past. Cas’ deep, strained voice interrupts his thoughts.

“And so that is why I would not make a good boyfriend, Dean.”

“I still disagree,” Dean says, nudging him until Cas looks at him. He hopes his eyes say everything he thinks Cas can’t bear to hear out loud just yet. Cas’ face softens before he sighs in resignation.

“I’m not safe to be around, don’t you see that? I couldn’t keep Apollo safe, and I ran away from my family without making sure they were safe. I failed to keep the ones I loved safe.”

“No,” Dean shakes his head vigorously. “No, you succeeded. What she did to Apollo wasn’t your fault, and you took him away from her as soon as it was safe to do so. You protected him.”

“I should’ve left before she ever became a threat to him!”

“You said yourself she’d never been a threat to him before, and you didn’t bring him into that living situation. She did. You left as soon as you could, and you made sure he was taken care of.”

“I should have insisted that she return him when she brought him home. I knew what she was like.”

“And what do you think would’ve happened?” When he says nothing, Dean says, “Exactly. She
would’ve hurt him on the spot, just to get to you. You did the best you could do in a terrible situation. And as far as your family, you ran away from them even though you could’ve used their help, just so that she wouldn’t follow you there and maybe hurt them. You did what you thought was right while still trying to protect yourself.”

Cas grimaces as if to disagree, then sighs. “Even so. I’m damaged, Dean. Why would you want to be with someone who’s damaged?”

“Hey now,” Dean says, shaking his head. “She’s damaged, not you. Only damaged people would hurt animals and other people like that.” He strokes Cas’ hand tenderly and studies the wrung-out exhaustion in Cas’ features. “You wanna close the curtains and watch a movie? I can soak the popcorn in a ton of vegan butter and salt.” A small smile pulls at the corners of Cas’ mouth as he nods. For Dean, it’s like a rainbow after a storm.

Dean is surprised when Cas falls asleep a while later, one hand in Sully’s fur and the other in Dean’s hand because he let Dean take it. He’s sure Cas didn’t mean to fall asleep, but he smiles gently anyway, happy that he felt safe enough to let his guard down a little. He sighs contentedly and stares at Cas rather than the TV until his eyes close.

Chapter End Notes

Love to you all <3

*Warnings for the following:
Coercion
Manipulation
Physical abuse
Verbal/Emotional abuse
Mental/psychological abuse
Animal abuse
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

More of Cas’ past is revealed. See the end notes for trigger warnings if needed. Take care of yourselves. <3

(And take heart — there is sweetness in this chapter, too!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sudden movement and an unexpected presence have Castiel waking and surging onto his feet in seconds, shielding Dean and Sully with extended arms as he knocks the attacker onto the floor. “Oh shit,” he says when he sees Sam laid out on his ass in his own living room.

There’s a number of “I’m sorry”s from Castiel and Sam and an equal number of admonishments hurled toward Sam from Dean and Jess. Sully barks through it all, ready to defend or play, whichever seems appropriate.

“I’m sorry, Cas, I wasn’t thinking. I was just goofing around, trying to get back at Dean for waking me up this morning. Brotherly shit,” Sam explains as he hoists himself up against the armchair nearby.

“No, no, I overreacted. I... startle easily,” he explains sheepishly.

“You’re fine, Cas,” Dean assures him, then grunts at his brother, “What’d ya have to go and do that for, dumbass?” as he digs ice from his shirt. His brother’s apologies fall silently on Dean’s ears as he guides Castiel back to the couch.

“I leave the room for one minute…” Jess scowls at her husband, who looks rightfully chastised. She turns back to the men seated on the couch. “Can I show you a picture I took of the two of you before he woke you?” Jess asks shyly with a cautious smile. “I promise I’ll delete it if you want, but it’s so cute.”

“Oh, Castiel says. She sits beside him and tilts her phone so Castiel and Dean can see it.

Castiel can’t help but smile, despite the adrenaline still pumping through his veins. Sully is nestled next to him. Castiel’s right hand is on his flank. His left hand is held loosely by Dean’s right. Their heads are drooped toward each other, like marionettes resting before the next show. Dean is just as handsome in sleep as he is awake, his lashes sweeping over sun-pinkened cheeks.

He’s tempted to tell her to delete it. He doesn’t want anyone to have his picture. It’s not safe. But he remembers something Mia asked him: How long will you keep hiding? “Is this the only one?” he asks, just to be sure.

“Yeah, I promise,” she says as she flicks through the previous several photos on her camera roll, including a silly one of Sam wearing a colander on his head. He points to it and looks at Sam.

“Your hat is fetching, Sam,” he teases gently, letting him know that all is forgiven. Sam relaxes and blushes a bit. “I would appreciate it if you don’t share it with anyone else, but it’s fine, Jess,” he says to answer her concern. “Would you send it to me, please?” She beams. So does Dean.
“Me too?” Dean asks hopefully, glancing at Castiel with a smile that makes his heart flutter despite his self-consciousness about Dean knowing his ugly past. Some of it, anyway. The overview. When Castiel nods his permission, pink sweeps over Dean’s cheeks like the sky at sunrise. God, he is beautiful.

Castiel goes home shortly after, and as July steps into August things settle back into the familiar pattern he missed so much. Saturday night, after Jess, Sam, and Sully head home from a much-needed dip in the pool after the sweltering day, Dean lies with Castiel side by side on two lounge chairs. His wet shirt sticks uncomfortably against his skin. He wishes he had the freedom to remove it, like Dean does. He sneaks a peek at Dean’s chest in the light of the moon and the citronella torches. An old remembrance of something called want meanders around the perimeter of his heart, looking for a weak spot in the wall so it can gain entrance. He shakes his head to himself but doesn’t avert his eyes. He muses that perhaps Dean should have been named Apollo before he cringes a little at the memory. He wonders if he could safely contact Garth to see how Apollo is doing.

“I still wanna date you, you know,” Dean says, eyes closed and unaware of Castiel’s ogling.

Castiel turns his head to the stars so Dean doesn’t spot him staring and smiles. He thought it would feel awkward after telling Dean, but it doesn’t. He feels lighter than he has in a long time. Still, he says, “That wouldn’t be wise.”

“You’re not hung up on the whole ‘technically married’ thing, are you? ‘Cause if anyone had grounds for divorce — hell, an annulment — it’s you. And I don’t mind. Far as I’m concerned, your marriage was never a real marriage anyway.”

“It’s not that.”

Dean turns and taps Castiel’s arm to get his attention. “Is it that you’re not interested in me like that? I mean if it is, just tell me. I don’t wanna make you uncomfortable.”

Castiel’s face flushes with heat as he lowers his eyes. “It’s not that at all,” he admits. He knows without looking that Dean is positively glowing, and it makes Castiel hide his face and huff. He asks what the hesitancy is, more softly than Castiel expects. “I just… I’m not sure I would meet your expectations. I’m still afraid of you sometimes.” He doesn’t mean to say the last part out loud, but it’s too late.

“Of me?”

Castiel sighs heavily. “Not of you, exactly. Well, I mean… shit. It’s not you,” he says, sitting up to face Dean. “I freeze up if you do something that she used to do or if it even looks like you’re going to.”

Dean’s face falls, causing shadows that make him look sad in the torchlight. “Oh, Cas. I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Please, I’ll be more careful, just tell—”

“I know, Dean. You’ve been fine and completely appropriate. It’s not like you do any of it on purpose. I’ve sort of avoided addressing those triggers directly in therapy because, living alone, it hasn’t been a huge issue. The few times I do go out I’m very careful and don’t let anyone near me. Except for the babies, of course.”

“I still fucking love that. That’s going well?”

“Yes. They are so precious. Such fighters despite the odds.”
“Hmm. Sounds like someone I know.”

Dean gives him a little smile and a fond look that makes Castiel say, “I suppose I will be working harder on those triggers in therapy now.” Dean’s golden glow from within helps him rise above his embarrassment. Dean feels better, and that matters to Castiel.

“So, is there something I shouldn’t do anymore, or…?”

“No, it’s fine. You are always very careful when you approach me.”

“Yeah, careful except when I’m scaring you half to death in your workshop,” Dean grumbles.

“Well, I was ready to hit you with a metal pipe if necessary,” Castiel grimaces. He really does feel bad about that, looking back.

“Whoa.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. No one has ever approached me there and I felt trapped, and then when I saw you had something behind your back…”

“Ah, shit.”

“But see, that’s where I’m different than other people you could date. Most would assume the best. I concluded that your kindness was to get me to trust you and that you were finally going to show your true colors.”

“Like her.”

Castiel closes his eyes against the memory as he says, “I thought you had a weapon.”

“Jesus, Cas.” He seems to understand the implication. Dean rakes his fingers harshly through his hair and Castiel feels like scum.

“I’m so, so sorry.”

“No, I mean, it’s not you. I’m not mad at you. Sometimes it’s hard to believe that this shit happens to people, you know?”

“I’m sorry for putting this on you…”

“No,” Dean says. He gestures to Castiel’s hand with a question in his eyes, and Castiel offers it, wondering if perhaps Dean needs the comforting more than him. “I like you. So much. It just breaks my heart that I could do anything that would remind you of such a horrible time.” He licks his lips and continues, “But I’m gonna stick around, Cas, as long as you’re okay with it. And I’ll work on whatever I gotta to help you be more comfortable. And maybe we can work our way to a date, if you want?”

Castiel laughs quietly at the hopefulness in Dean’s eyes. “You’re a glutton for punishment,” he says with self-deprecating humor.

“Nah. Just a glutton for you,” he winks. Castiel can’t help but feel a little bubbly after that.

His past doesn’t come up in the next few weeks. They are just… them, whatever that is. They walk, gaining a walking buddy a few times in Charlie, his neighbor, who felt brave enough to approach one day when they were starting out. She strikes him as quite intelligent and endearing. She works from home and has a bedridden mother who uses home health care, which explains the
cars in and out of her driveway all the time. He can relate to her feeling of isolation, though his is more self-imposed. They work, Dean helping Castiel tear down the picket fence (with Sam’s help) to make room for his living wall project. When Benny drives by in his truck and notices the activity, he stops and asks if they need a hand. Castiel would usually balk and keep others at arm’s length, but this time he looks to Dean, who assures him that Benny is “good people” and that he will “kick his ass” if Castiel feels threatened in any way. Castiel smiles at the sentiment, knowing he can probably kick the guy’s ass a little harder than Dean can right now. The work does indeed go much faster with four people rather than just himself, and he even gets the posts for the new walls set, an unexpected and welcome surprise that puts him ahead of schedule. Takeout seems to be a satisfactory thank you to the men involved, and they congratulate each other on a job well done. Benny offers to help again when Castiel’s ready to install the irrigation system and finish the walls with the cedar planks. And they watch movies, and play games, and swim, and Dean sings him silly songs, and they go on with life as if the heavy talks never happened.

Until Dean asks him to ride in his old black car.

***

Things have been going so well.

They got past Cas’ telling of the tale (the major points, anyway), past Sam’s douchebaggery (he sure as hell got him back for that one — who sticks ice down a guy’s shirt when he’s sleeping next to someone, anyway?), past Dean’s confession that he still wants to date him and Cas’ admission that he’s scared of Dean sometimes (and oh, that one hurt). They resumed their routine and Cas even let Charlie and Benny into his little circle. God, Dean’s so proud of him for that.

And then Dean has to ask him to go for a ride. In the dark. To a desolate area. Dumbass.

“So Cas, it’s a gorgeous night,” he says to Cas after they share a late supper on Cas’ patio. The late August sun is tucking itself into fluffy pink-orange blankets. “I was wonderin’ if you wanted to take a ride? See the stars? Sam told me about a spot ‘bout a half hour away that’s far enough from light pollution and shit to really get a good view.”

“Um, alright,” Cas says. Dean looks over at him and smiles giddily. He can’t help it. It’s not a date, he knows, but having Cas in his Baby with him, windows down on the open road, is gonna be…

“Awesome,” he says. “I’ll go get ‘er. Be right back.” He runs to Sam and Jess’ as best as he can (the leg isn’t 100% yet, but it’s much better) and grabs his keys from the hook.

“Me ‘n’ Cas are headin’ out,” he calls to no one in particular. “Be back whenever!”

“Have fun!” Sam shouts. Dean hears the water running and assumes Jess just got home from work and is showering. He runs upstairs to grab an old blanket (or maybe a new one, he has no idea and doesn’t really care) and throws it in the backseat before he pulls up to Cas’ house. Cas is waiting on the stairs, well away from the driveway.

“Heya, Cas! Come on in!” he calls through the open passenger window.

Cas approaches the car like it’s going to bite him.

“Don’t be shy,” he teases. “She’s badass but sweet as can be.” He revs the engine a little and Cas jumps back, eyes wide. Crap. He forgot about the startle thing. “Sorry,” he calls sheepishly with a little wave.
“Um, yes. Okay,” he says. He doesn’t move toward the car. Dean frowns and steps out.

“Everything alright?” Dean asks as he approaches, the headlights reflecting off his bare legs where he stops.

“Yes, sorry,” he says and scrambles to get into the car. Well, then. Dean shrugs and hops into his seat.

“What’s the blanket for?” Cas asks just as Dean puts the old girl in gear.

“Figured it’d be better than the ground when we’re looking up at the sky,” he grins. Dean watches the shadows bounce a little around his throat as he swallows and nods.

“Man, the bugs are bad tonight,” Dean gripes a few miles later. Insect remains are splattered across his windshield. “Oh, that guy didn’t make it,” he frowns upon spotting a raccoon along the side of the road. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Cas wince and do some little movement with his thumb. He doesn’t think Cas wanted him to see, so he doesn’t ask. “How do you think Stan is doing?” he asks instead. Cas seems to relax.

“Very well, last I knew. His wing healed and he is, hopefully, enjoying a full and happy life.” Dean smiles at Cas’ care for the tiny bird. Cas smiles back, the first smile he’s seen since he came back with Baby. But his face quickly clouds over again as he looks straight ahead. The ride is quiet until they get to the clearing, far into the country. It’s still and private, with a slight breeze and millions of stars. Absolutely perfect.

“Just gotta grab the blanket,” Dean informs Cas, who is out of the car in a flash. He frowns as he grabs the blanket and climbs out, leaving his keys in the ignition because he doesn’t need them digging into his thigh (or worse, dropping out of his pocket and having to find them with just the flashlight on his phone). He lays it on the ground, spreading it onto the soft earth just in front of the Impala, which is ticking intermittently as it cools. He beckons Cas, who sits on it much too cautiously. Dean’s about to ask him if he’s okay before he remembers the bug spray he knows is in his glove compartment.

“Hang on a sec,” Dean says as he pops up and gets into the car, turning the key enough to turn on the interior light. He roots around until he finds it, then turns the key until the lights turn off and slams the door behind him. “Bug spray,” he says as he rounds the hood, only to find Cas standing to the side of the car but several feet away, his fists clenched and his breath coming out in raspy puffs. Oh shit. He drops the spray immediately and puts his hands up in front of him, palms out.

“Oh shit.

What’d I do, Cas?” he asks gently.

“The car,” Cas pants. “I can’t… can’t be… you can’t be in...”

“Okay, sweetheart,” Dean says. “Can I come see you?”

Cas shakes his head. It tears him up, but he tries to understand. Sometimes Sam didn’t want anyone near him, either. “Okay. I’m not going to hurt you, I swear. I swear on everyone I love. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

For several minutes they stand there, Dean breathing steadily and Cas eventually meeting him breath for breath. His hands unclench slowly. “She hit me with her car,” he explains in a small voice. Dean wants to vomit. The fucking bitch. “Can we move the blanket?” Cas asks.

“Yeah, of course. I’m so sorry,” he says hurriedly, picking it up without any care and moving it to the spot next to the dark-haired man. Cas exhales slowly, painfully, before he sits. “You can sit,”
he says. So he does. He offers his hand and Cas takes it.

“It was just before we got Apollo,” he starts. “We’d just had a storm and I’d finished clearing the driveway. I offered my help to a neighbor who was having trouble with his snowblower, and when I came back she was angry, which was nothing new. She said she was going to get groceries. I was sprinkling ice melt onto the driveway when she got into her car.” He heaves a breath and continues, “I was in front of her vehicle when she hit the gas.”

“Jesus, Cas,” Dean blurts, involuntarily squeezing his hand as his other hand flies to his mouth. Cas squeezes back.

“I flew backwards and I screamed in pain, of course. She got out of her vehicle and she said, ‘I could’ve finished the job, Castiel. Remember that.’” Dean shakes his head in horror. “I think she would’ve left me there but the neighbor I helped saw it happen and came running, so she screamed and carried on, asking if I was okay and crying about ‘accidentally’ hitting me. He already had the ambulance called, so there was nothing she could do. I was very fortunate that only my leg was broken. Just after that, she brought Apollo home for me, telling me how fucking sorry she was.”

Cas grows silent, and Dean is struck by several things: one, he wants to kill this woman with his bare hands; two, this must be the “bad situation” he’d referred to when he first told him what happened to him and Cas severely underplayed the matter; three, even when horrible things were happening to him at home, he still reached out to help others; and four, Cas actually sounds pissed about the whole thing. That strikes him the most. He takes it as a good sign.

“You’re pissed, huh.”

Cas tilts his head to the sky, staring at the stars they haven’t been able to appreciate yet. “I should be able to have a normal relationship with you. You should be able to ask me on a date and I should be able to say yes without a second of hesitation. You should be able to take me on a ride in the beautiful car you’re so proud of, and I should be able to ride in it without comparing myself to the splattered bugs on the windshield — an insignificant, inconvenient mess. I should be able to enjoy the trip you planned without thinking you’re taking me in the woods to murder me. You should be able to go into your car without me thinking you’re going to run me over. She took all that away from me.”

Hot tears leak from Dean’s eyes. “I should’ve asked you more, been more careful. Things have been so easy between us, I just… I didn’t think.”

Cas leans forward and wipes Dean’s tears off his cheeks. His tender touch is glorious and so unexpected it just prompts more tears. “That’s the point, though, Dean. You shouldn’t have to think. Tonight should’ve been beautiful. Romantic, even. But instead you’re comforting your panicked freak neighbor.”

“First of all, you’re not a freak. Second, your panic is well-justified. Man, if I’d been through that, I’d be freaking out, too. I don’t know if I could even drive myself, but you drive yourself to therapy and the hospital and shit. Third, tonight is still beautiful. Look at it.” He looks up and Cas follows his gaze. The stars twinkle like diamonds on velvet, and yet… “Still not as pretty as your eyes, but it’ll do.” Cas turns to him with a bashful twist of his lips. Dean’s flirty grin softens. “And hey, you telling me all this stuff is beautiful, too. What happened to you is ugly, but you taking your life back? Not keeping secrets? Beauty, man.”

Cas gazes at him a while, shame yielding to something buttery soft. “I think Mia was wrong. I think there’s no one else in the world like you.” Dean doesn’t know what he’s talking about, but when Cas leans back and tugs Dean closer, leaning against his shoulder, he’s completely okay with
it. He sings “Sky Full of Stars” and makes Cas smile shyly when he calls him his heavenly view and laugh loudly when he carries the notes too long.

“I still want to date you,” Dean tells him.

“Keep asking. Maybe one day I’ll say yes.”

They sit in silence again, a little smile on each of their faces.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for the following:
Physical violence
Mental/psychological abuse (threatening/intimidating statement)

Next chapter: so much sweetness and a welcome little surprise for Dean...
“I’ve made you uncomfortable,” Cas says to Dean one morning a few days after their stargazing.

“No, you haven’t.”

“Yes, I have. I’m good at picking up subtle hints, you know. Call it a well-developed protective instinct. Hand me that piece right there.”

Dean frowns and hands him a long, flat piece of oak plywood, which he places on two sawhorses. He tried to deny it, but there’s no use, really. He’s so worried about triggering something painful for Cas that he’s been kind of weird around him, not really knowing what to say. He tells him so, as gently as possible.

“I understand, Dean.”

“But that doesn’t mean I don’t want this,” Dean hurries to add, gesturing between them with a pointed finger. “Because I do. I really do. I just gotta, you know, know what makes it hard for you.” The faintest smirk alights on Cas’ face. “That’s not what I meant!” Dean exclaims, flustered. Stupid carrier pigeon.

Cas smiles, then nods, relief softening his eyes even as he grows more serious. “What if... what if we talked about it, a little at a time, over the space of days or weeks or however long it will take? You can ask me questions and I’ll answer them if I can. That way it feels more gradual for both of us, more like a steady yet tolerable discomfort rather than a knife to the chest. What do you think?”

Dean hopes the knife to the chest thing is not something Cas knows intimately. He nods. “Yeah, alright. But hey, if it gets to be too much, or I’m being an asshole and don’t know it or something...”

“I’ll tell you. Grab the sandpaper and ask me what you want to know.”

Shush-shush-shush-shush fills the air as they begin to sand the wood they’ll use for their project, a bookcase for Sam and Jess. Dean mentioned in passing that he wanted to do something nice for them for putting up with his ass for so long, and Cas remembered the flimsy bookcase Dean complained about the day they met. Dean admits he takes a lot of pleasure in knowing that Cas remembers the day they met as much as Dean does. He loses himself in the repetitive motions as he thinks of something he can ask. There’s so much he wants to know. “Why aren’t you divorced?” he finally musters.

“I tried,” Cas says, his face composed as his muscular arm caresses the wood with an expert hand. “I contacted a lawyer — several, actually — but they all said I’d probably have to show up for court at least once, especially since she’d probably fight it, and I just couldn’t face her. I asked about waiving my appearance but they said it’s generally not done in New York, and if it is it’s
because of something dire. I was not prepared to spill my life story to them. Believe me, if I could’ve figured out how to divorce her, I would’ve.”

Dean ponders the foolishness of the New York court system before he asks, “Think you will?”

“I have hope,” he answers, glancing at Dean briefly.

“Think you’ll ever get married again?”

Cas stops and arches an eyebrow at him (and it shouldn’t be hot, they’re having a serious conversation here, but damn) and says, “I can’t even accept an invitation for a date from a handsome man.” One side of his mouth curls up as he looks at Dean for a second too long, then starts sanding again. Dean wonders if it shot up another fifty degrees in here or if it’s just him. He hides a pleased smile with a bowed head as he resumes his own task.

“I’m not sure if I would ever remarry,” Cas continues unprompted, “which is why I will probably be a dead end for you. I just don’t know if I can. The idea of being legally bound… there’s an element of choice that feels removed once there are legal obligations.”

Dean ponders that. He’d never thought of it that way. “It’s not a dealbreaker,” he shrugs. Yes, he’d always wanted to get married, but was it really necessary? The surprised smile he receives in return makes him think nope, not necessary at all.

They finish the sanding on one side and flip their boards to sand the other. “Dude, why don’t you have an electric sander?” Dean asks, wiping sweat from his brow.

“I do,” he answers, “but this is a good workout, don’t you think?” He pins Dean with a mischievous smile he’s never seen from him before. The goofy, loose-tongued idiot he was around Cas when he first met him surges back.

“Don’t think your arms need a workout,” Dean comments before realizing something so bold might put him off, especially after the accidental double entendre earlier. “I mean, not that I noticed how muscular your arms are, ‘cause I didn’t. I mean I did, but not in a sexual way. Not that arms are sexual. They could be, I guess, but they’re mostly… um… not.” Dean eyes a set of tools along the wall and wonders if he could use the pliers to pull out his stupid tongue.

“I simply meant that this would be a helpful adjunct to your physical therapy,” Cas explains with a solemn expression. Dean scratches his fingers through his hair and is trying to figure out how to apologize when Cas bursts out laughing.

“Oh, your face, Dean! You just… oh, you poor thing, I wanted to rescue you but you just kept going…” he says between guffaws.

Dean will make an ass out of himself a hundred times just to hear that sweet laugh.

They finish the bookcase within a few days, and during that time Dean learns that Cas grew up in Rhode Island and his parents still live there (last he knew), that he learned most of his building skills from his dad, that he was an average student unless the subject really interested him, that he knew his estranged wife had “significant, untreated issues” (understatement) but knew little else of her past, that he’d been married just under two years when he managed to escape, that he’s been in Maine since May of last year, and that he’s going to be thirty soon.

“How’re you gonna celebrate?” he asks as they roll the bookcase on a dolly to Sam and Jess’ house for the big reveal.
“I’m not,” he answers. “I only told you because you asked.”

“What? No celebration? Aww. Can I bake you a vegan cake, at least?”

“I suppose,” he says with a smile in his voice. He can’t see him behind the bookcase.

“What kind do you like?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters. Tell me or I’ll make it with pickles and broccoli, and then we’d all be stuck eating it. You don’t want us eating pickles and broccoli cake, do you, Cas?”

He hears Cas chuckle. “That does sound terrible. Alright. I like chocolate cake with peanut butter frosting.”

“One of the many reasons I like you,” Dean says as they lift the bookcase into the house.

Sam and Jess adore the new piece and marvel at the craftsmanship. Dean gives all the credit to Cas, who brushes it off as usual and credits Dean way too much. Cas teaches Jess a new vegan dish and they eat outside on the deck.

“So Cas’ birthday is coming up soon,” Dean says before clapping his hand to his mouth. “Shit. Was I not supposed to say that?” he asks through his fingers.

“It’s fine,” Cas says. “Actually, I wanted to ask your opinion about something. I was thinking about maybe… possibly… potentially having a few people over before I close the pool. I heard it’s supposed to be quite warm this weekend, so I thought Sunday might be ideal. Just Charlie and Benny and all of you, since I don’t really know anyone else. We could do the cake then and take care of two things at once. Um, thoughts?”

“Dude,” Dean says with a huge grin. Cas turns away in utter embarrassment, but not before Dean catches the tiny smile on his face.

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“I cannot believe I’m doing this party. A party! Whose brilliant idea was this?”

“Yours, I believe.”

“Damn it,” he mutters. “What if…” Castiel stops and rests his head on his hand.

“What if what?”

“I… I don’t know. I’m so used to looking for danger and panicking about negative outcomes that I just look for them. But I’m not seeing them. I’m losing my edge, Mia.”

“Maybe you’re just sharpening a new edge.” At the quirk of Castiel’s brow, she elaborates, “Maybe you’re starting to look for positive outcomes all on your own.”

“I don’t know about that,” he huffs with a self-deprecating chuckle.

“Having Dean in your life seems like a pretty positive outcome.”

“The jury’s out as to whether he’ll believe that over time.”
“What do you believe?”

Castiel watches a pair of robins approach each other on the branch outside the window. “I believe he is the most positive thing to happen to me in a long time. I just hope I don’t blow it.” He sighs. “He wants to go on a date with me. And I want to go on a date with him. But dating will lead to emotional and physical expectations that I’m not sure I can meet.” Castiel turns back to his therapist and tucks his legs under him. “There’s this part of me that wants to run as far as I can, because what if I just end up hurt again or what if I’m wrong about him? But there’s this part of me that just… the way he looks at me, the way he holds my hand… I just want to hold him. To let myself be held. I miss that.”

“You remember how good that felt. Before April.”

“Yes. I remember kissing my boyfriend or girlfriend without a thought. I remember wrestling around, just playing, and I had no fear whatsoever. I thought it was fun. A turn-on, even, sometimes. I’m not sure I could do that anymore. I don’t think I could let myself be pinned under someone or pin someone down. I know too well what being helpless feels like.” Castiel’s eyes wander around the room. He licks his lips and worries them with his teeth.

“You’re concerned that any sex or affection will turn violent.”

“I’m scared, yes.”

“Excluding April, did any expressions of physical affection or sex turn violent in any of your other relationships?”

Castiel rolls his eyes a little, knowing where she’s going and knowing he needs to be walked through his terrible thought processes. “No. None of them were violent. All my relationships and encounters were positive and pleasurable.”

“So she was the exception.”

“She was the exception, not the rule. She is the outlier.”

Mia smiles but stays silent.

“I want to hold him.”

“So ask him. Let him know how far you’re willing to go. See if he’s willing to go there with you and stop at whatever boundaries you set, and respect his. Do you think he’ll listen to you?”

“Yes. He’s so considerate.”

“Hmm. What if you tried this and it went well?”

He knows she’s poking a little fun at his what ifs and, at the same time, giving him some much-needed thought reframing. He smiles and sips his tea.

Sunday morning is bright and full of promise. The sun is shining through the early morning mist like the hopefulness of a bride’s smile through her gauzy veil. Raindrops from the late-night thunderstorm hang like a string of pearls from the leafy green branches. It’s already too warm for the light sweatshirt he brought out just in case, so he tosses it on the stairs so he doesn’t have to bother with the alarm system again and starts his run. Castiel ponders the day ahead. He’s nervous, but a little excited at the same time. He’s not a stranger to friendly gatherings. He went to many of them, remembers most, and always had a good time. He loved humanity once.
“Hey sunshine,” Dean calls from his brother’s yard. Sunshine indeed, he thinks as his eyes rake over Dean. He looks absolutely gorgeous in black running shorts and a red t-shirt with some sort of motocross logo across his broad chest. His freckles dance across his nose and his eyes rival the greenest valley. Stunning. Desire flares hotly through his chest. You shouldn’t be getting caught up in this feeling, Castiel.

Oh yeah? And why not?

His internal monologue is getting feisty. He smirks just a little as he stops in front of Dean. “Are you walking Sully this morning?” he asks, nudging his chin toward the dog at his side.

“Running, actually.”

“I thought you hated long-distance shit.”

Dean cackles brightly at that, looking pleased. “Yeah, well, gotta get back to myself.”

He knows he means get back into his old shape for his job, but the statement hits close to home anyway. “Well, here’s to getting back to ourselves,” he says just as Jess joins them. She suggests they go together, and they keep the pace easy for Dean.

They stop to let Sully do his business, and Dean pants, “You guys don’t need to take it easy on me. I can take it.”


“Race me, then,” Castiel challenges. Dean eyes him skeptically, though he looks intrigued.

“Really? You sure…?”

Castiel knows what he’s thinking, and he can’t say he didn’t think of it himself, but God help him, he’s starting to trust Dean and he’s been working on his triggers. “I’m sure,” he nods. “I’m okay,” he adds, close to Dean’s ear so only Dean can hear him. “Besides, I’m going to win, anyway.” He grins at the surprise, then determination, on Dean’s face.

They decide on a point to race to, and when Jess yells “Go!” Dean bolts. Castiel gives him a head start.

“Hey! You comin’?” Dean yells a few seconds and some distance later.

“I suppose,” Castiel shouts back. With a smile to Jess and a pat to Sully’s head, he takes off, barrelling toward the man with the feeling of freedom loosening his chest and lengthening his strides. Dean sees him coming and starts running again, but it doesn’t matter. Castiel flies past him and doesn’t stop until he reaches the target — aptly enough, the stop sign at the end of the street.

“I give up,” Dean wheezes as he arrives at the sign and slumps to the ground.

“Never give up, Dean,” Castiel encourages him as he gasps for air.

“Easy for you to say.”

“Not really.”
Dean meets Castiel’s eyes briefly but meaningfully before Jess arrives.

The party is even better than Castiel had hoped it could be. Benny brings his wife, Andrea, who he doesn’t expect but is a quiet, lovely person. Charlie asks if her friend Donna can come, and Castiel challenges himself to say yes. It turns into a good decision, he thinks. She is the one he used to refer to as Mrs. Prissy in his head, but it turns out he was wrong about that. The cars were her husband’s idea, and the attitude he always assumed was haughtiness was actually her anger with him over his infidelity and other issues. They had a protracted divorce and she finally won the house. He just moved out a couple of weeks ago, refusing to do so until everything was final because he believed he’d win, and the relief and joy on her face make her look like a completely different person. Sam and Jess and Sully are here, of course, and Dean, who makes everything better anyway.

“Things are good, huh?” Dean asks when Castiel is at the grill. He looks stunned when Castiel presses hamburger patties on the far left side of the grates. “What are you doing?”

Castiel shrugs as he makes the sign of the cross with his thumb unobtrusively. “It’s not my choice, but I invited others to bring meat if they preferred it. A couple of people did.”

“But… that’s against… you. Your values.”

“We have different values, yes, but as I told you, I don’t push my own values about the issue on others. I provide information when I can and hope to influence, but people can make their choices.”

“But doesn’t it… I don’t know, hurt you?”

“I’m okay.”

“But…”

“Dean. I wasn’t always vegan. I became vegan after high school. I just hated to think of any living thing suffering needlessly.” He presses his lips together and closes the lid, sliding the spatula he’d brought out specifically for the hamburger patties onto a clean plate. “But I know not everyone thinks that way, and I manage. I simply say a little blessing in my head, thank the animals for their sacrifice, and move on.”

“That thing with your thumb. That the blessing?”

“I suppose, yes. It’s just the sign of the cross. I was raised in the Catholic faith.”

“You did that the night we went out to see the stars. After we saw the dead raccoon.”

Castiel shrugs, feeling self-conscious that Dean noticed that. “Everyone deserves a little something to show that their lives mattered, even if a thought is all I can give them.”

Dean smiles crookedly, that fond grin that Castiel finds irresistible. “You’re really something amazing, Castiel… Um… Well, shit. I don’t even know your last name.”

Castiel laughs at the absurdity of the moment. Despite how close they’re becoming, he’s never even told him his full name. He has good reasons, of course. *Had* good reasons. Jess approaches with the vegan burgers and distracts them, so the moment is forgotten.

After dinner, swimming, and laughing so much that Castiel’s belly and face hurt from the overuse of long-underutilized muscles, everyone helps him clean up before they go. He receives many compliments on the living wall and his other work, just as many on his vegan options (even the
meat-eaters begrudgingly offer praise), and hears lots of *This was so fun* and *We should get together more often.*

“You did awesome, Cas,” Dean says warmly before he goes. He is, as always, the last one to leave.

“We did, Dean. I could not have done this without your help.”

“Eh, I just vacuumed the pool, brought out drinks and shit.”

“That’s not all you’ve done to help me.” He offers his hand, which Dean takes eagerly. *Now or never, Castiel.* “Um… May I give you a hug, Dean?”

The question seems to stymie him for a moment (which is both nerve-wracking and hilarious, since the man is so rarely silent), but then he lets go of Cas’ hand and opens his arms wide. “Fuck yeah,” he says, his grin almost too wide for his face to contain. It makes Castiel laugh self-consciously, knowing he’s about to make what should be a spontaneous, joyful moment a bit of a drag.

“Just, um, no more than that, right now. And, um, arms around the middle of my back, not near my neck or waist, please?”

“Anything you need, Cas.” He swears Dean’s smile could power a small city.

“Um, anything you need? Boundaries or anything?”

“Nope. Just you.”

Castiel loops his arms around Dean’s neck and holds him tightly as Dean holds him tenderly around his back. His throat tightens as he realizes this is the first hug he’s received since he left New York over a year ago, when Garth took him by surprise and hugged him goodbye. They stay like that for some time, serenaded by the crickets. Castiel is loathe to let go. So, apparently, is Dean, but he loosens his arms immediately as soon as Castiel starts to pull back. Castiel knows Dean is being cautious. He appreciates it more than he can say. But he can say *something.*

“Novak,” he tells Dean. “Castiel Novak. Just between us for now, okay?”

“You got it, Castiel Novak,” Dean murmurs in the short distance between their bodies, heeding his words quite literally. “Good night, Cas.”

“Good night, Dean,” Castiel answers. It has been a good night indeed.

Chapter End Notes

You’re all going to be fuming next time… just FYI. ;)


Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Pitchforks ready? LOL...

There are references to abuse but no details... please see the end notes for warnings if you feel you need them. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first hint of autumn comes, not surprisingly for the area, just before its official start. Castiel takes a moment to appreciate the breath filling his body, crisp air sharp and sweet like the Macs and Cortlands Sam and Jess brought over for him after their trip to the orchard. Today he plans to plant bulbs for next spring, do a little fall cleaning, and (hopefully, if he wants him) spend time with Dean. But first, a run is in order.

He ties a sweatshirt around his waist, not quite sure if he’ll get chilly or not since he’s still wearing shorts and t-shirts. He doesn’t give up the shorts until October, usually. Even if he didn’t fear growing chilly, the sweatshirt provides an extra bit of security, since the t-shirt is some kind of fancy running shirt and is much more fitted than his usual variety and could ride up easily. It’s something Dean gave him for his birthday yesterday. He didn’t want to be rude and tell him it’s too short, because it really isn’t. Not for most people. Just for him.

Castiel stops by to see if Dean wants to run. He’s been getting better, determined to beat Castiel in a race sometime. Castiel doesn’t have the heart to tell Dean that will likely never happen. He is quite adept at running for his life, so running just to beat someone else is child’s play. A little light training.

Dean agrees, and they take Sully out too, since the pup is jumping all over Castiel and whining. Castiel harnesses and leashes him, careful to keep his back covered and away from Dean’s sight. Dean finishes tying his shoes.

“You look good, Cas,” Dean smiles as he eyes him in the new shirt. “Suits you.”

“Thank you. You too,” Castiel responds, heat rising in his skin at the compliment and at Dean’s own appearance, handsome as ever in shorts and a t-shirt that skims his body attractively.

“This old thing?” he says in a comically high-pitched voice as he flares the shirt out like a dress. Castiel grins, but is pulled by Sully toward the door, so they head out.

Dean is sweet and funny and talkative — he always is — but he seems more muted today, a haze settled over his usually sunny features. Castiel is quite practiced at reading subtle hints about people’s true emotions. “Something wrong, Dean?” he asks as they round a corner and disturb a pair of mourning doves. Castiel has to keep Sully on task; the dog’s eyes are much too interested in the birds and in the squirrel right behind them.

“No,” Dean says eventually. “Well, yes, but I don’t wanna bug you with my stuff.”

“You’re not bugging me, Dean,” Castiel assures him. “I am happy to listen if you’d like to talk.”
“You listen to me ramble all the time,” Dean tries to joke, but it tumbles unconvincingly from his lips.

“Dean,” he says gently, slowing them down to a walk. “You do not have to be reluctant to share negative feelings with me. Despite how cheerful you are usually, I know everyone has low times.”

“You’ve had enough of that in your life,” Dean says quietly, eyes focused on the ground.

“And you have given me so many happy times,” Castiel reminds him. “I understand if you’d rather not share, but if you do, please don’t be afraid to share with me. I will not break.” He avoids saying I have survived much worse, not wanting to belittle his distress. Besides, he really doesn’t know what is on Dean’s mind.

“It’s stupid.”

“So is being afraid of a blanket in the backseat of someone’s car, but here we are.” He chuckles a little to put Dean at ease. As Dean opens his mouth, Castiel warns, “And don’t argue with me. I’m working on reducing my reactivity to triggers.” Dean smiles, warm regard flashing in his eyes with a bit of sadness.

“Mom is trying to get me to come up for dinner tonight.”

“Oh. Alright.” Castiel knows he’s only seen his parents a handful of times since being in Maine due to their schedules. He also knows that Dean is leaving in the morning for nearly a month, first to drive out to California with his brother to pack up his apartment and then to Nevada to train for his first event (a big one, Dean told him) since he was sidelined. Castiel can’t deny that he wants Dean to himself before he leaves, but he can’t be selfish. It’s not as if they are dating or anything, since Castiel still hasn’t accepted (despite Dean’s frequent reminders that he still wants to). Besides, he’s used to disappointment. “Do you not want to see your parents?”

Dean shrugs. “It’s not that. I… I wanted to spend tonight just hanging out with you,” he admits. Affection soaks Castiel in warmth he feels to his bones. “But she’s being kind of pushy about it.”

“I’m sorry.” He holds out his hand to Dean, who takes it with a grateful smile that brings the light to his eyes once again.

“It’s okay. I mean, I love my parents, but I…” He looks at Castiel briefly, something hovering behind his lips, but he seems to shuffle it aside to say, “I’m going to miss you, that’s all.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” he says without a thought, without worrying it will make him vulnerable or will be used against him someday.

Dean stops walking abruptly. “You will?” he asks to the back of Castiel’s head, since Castiel hadn’t quite realized he’d stopped.

Castiel turns to face him. Dean’s body and everything around them seems to be suspended, holding, waiting anxiously with great attention on the next words from Castiel’s mouth, as if he were Moses bringing down the Word of God. How? How does he deserve this man’s interest, his patience and understanding, his desire, his soft eyes filled with something he once knew? “Of course I will,” he murmurs. “Of course I will.”

They have embraced before, nearly every day since the party, and have developed their own subtle signals of Is this okay? and Yes it is or Not just yet. But they don’t use them now, or not that Castiel notices. Perhaps it is starting to become implied — if you need comfort, you may seek it in me. They wrap their arms around each other simultaneously and sag in relief at the contact, the
reassurance that neither will forget the other. Dean breathes heavily in his embrace.

“I hoped. I just… I didn’t want to assume,” Dean explains in a whisper. He starts to stroke Castiel’s hair. Castiel breathes through the tiny shiver of panic at having someone’s hand so close to his neck. You can do this. You are safe. Dean seems to realize what he’s doing and freezes.

“It’s okay,” Castiel murmurs. “I’m okay.” Dean relaxes and resumes his stroking. It’s almost too tender to bear, which must be what leads him to the next thing to fall from his lips.

“I could go with you.”

Dean pulls back. “Are you sure?”

Are you crazy? You could be hurt! Or worse! You’re not safe there!

You’re safe. You can keep yourself safe. You’ll be with Dean.

“Yes,” he says.

Sully pulls on the leash, forcing them to move on. Castiel knows that if he hadn’t, they’d be hugging again in front of someone’s mailbox. Instead, Dean beams at him before resuming their run, his pace much jaunter and his face much smoother.

Dean’s parents live a couple of hours away, so he knows he’ll be in Dean’s car for some time. He hasn’t been in a vehicle with someone else for that length of time in years. He tries to focus on what to wear instead. He doesn’t have much in the way of dress clothes anymore, but he does have two pairs of dress pants, a couple of dress shirts, and a pair of shoes that Chuck bought him for Christmas last year “for client meetings.” It panicked him a bit, making him think that Chuck was dissatisfied with his work and was kicking him out before it was even complete. He didn’t share this with Chuck, but he didn’t have to. Chuck seemed to know what he was thinking (he’s kind of eerie like that) and reassured him that he only meant he hoped that Castiel would establish his business again, because he believed in his talent. That esteem meant much more than any other gift he could’ve received — except for the freckled, green-eyed gift who’s leaving tomorrow. Castiel sighs and buttons his navy blue long-sleeved dress shirt. He’ll be damned if he ever uses a tie again, after his experiences, so he leaves the top button open and rolls his sleeves up. He assesses himself in the mirror and gives himself a pep talk. This could be a trap. “You’re okay. This isn’t a trap,” he mutters aloud as he smooths his hands over his shirt. You’ll be in a strange place. It’s unsafe. “You’ve been in strange places before. You were in more danger at home than you were anywhere else.” They’ll outnumber you. You won’t be able to get away. “I know how to keep myself safe. I know Dean and I know Sam and Jess.” You knew April, too. Castiel shakes his head as he hears the knock at the door. “Yes, I knew April, all too well. He’s not her. Most people are good,” he says before he turns away and hustles downstairs. He checks the peephole, then opens the door to a smiling, gorgeous Dean. A memory of a past girlfriend, blonde and pretty wearing a green dress, flashes through his mind. She was picking him up for a date. He remembers the excitement, the shiver of anticipation. He used to love it. He feels it now and reminds himself that this is not a date of any sort. He is just supporting Dean and spending time with him before he leaves, that’s all. His heart hasn’t quite gotten the message yet. “Hi,” he breathes.

“Hi,” Dean smiles. “Um. Wow.”

Castiel’s smile drops a bit. Had he overdressed? “Um, I’m sorry, am I…”

“No! No, you are absolutely perfect. Just…” Dean stops and his eyes roam over Castiel’s body. It’s different than the way she used to look at him. The look is familiar, yet tinged with something
unfamiliar. Castiel cannot stop the blush that burns his cheeks.

“I clean up alright, then?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, you do.” He clears his throat. “Uh, ready?”

Castiel nods and approaches Dean’s vehicle. This will be the first time he’s been in it since that night. He hesitates when Dean stops at the driver’s side door. “Would you be more comfortable if you drove?” Dean asks, holding out his keys. “I’ll give you directions.”

Castiel swallows the ball of feelings rolling up from his chest. This is Dean’s Baby. He rarely lets anyone drive it, according to the man himself. He’s tempted, both because it would be a thrill to drive something that’s so intimately Dean as well as because yes, it would make him feel more comfortable. He must nod, because Dean comes around and takes his hand gently, placing the keys in his upturned palm, then opens the passenger door and slides in.

*You are safe. You are safe with him.*

***

“So Mom, what’re we having for supper tonight?”

“Pot roast,” she says. His stomach drops. He can hear the smile in her voice; she’s happy that he’s coming and believes that she’s doing something good by making one of his favorite meals. Which is good, yes, so he feels incredibly bad that this is about to get really awkward.

“Oh. Ah, good. That’s good, but uh, you mind if I bring something, too?”

“Whatever for? I have plenty of roast, plus the potatoes and carrots, the honey butter rolls you love, and of course apple pie with the cheddar on top.”

*Fuck. The veggies would’ve been great were they not cooked in beef broth and sitting right next to the meat. Can’t do the cheddar for the pie, plus the crust is made with butter. Can’t do the rolls because they have honey, and probably butter and milk, too. “Uh, well, I invited someone.”*

“Oh! Well, like I said, plenty to go around. You know I still cook like I’m feeding an army.”

Dean smiles. He knows. “Uh, yeah, I know, but he doesn’t eat any of that stuff.”

“Who is this? Is this the man you keep trying to date who keeps saying no?”

Dean sighs. He’s starting to regret this already. “It’s Cas, yeah.”

“Is he that picky?”

“No. He’s vegan.”

“I see,” she says slowly. “Well, he can eat the vegetables, the rolls, and the pie, anyway.”

“No, he can’t. He’s vegan. He doesn’t eat anything made of or produced by animals.”

She huffs an exaggerated puff of air. “You know, it’s polite to eat what’s offered when you go to someone’s home. Even Jessica and Sam eat what I make when they’re on their ‘healthy eating’ kicks. What is good enough for this man, Dean? Our food isn’t good enough to eat, you’re not good enough to date...”
Dean stiffens. *She doesn’t know*, he has to remind himself. Still, he’s already put off by her rudeness toward a man she hasn’t met. Someone Dean has feelings for. “Stop, Mom,” he pleads. “Please. I’m bringing something he can eat, so you don’t have to worry about that, alright? Listen, this isn’t something he would ordinarily do, so…”

“Oh, our company isn’t good enough, either?”

Dean is ready to forget the whole thing and watch movies with Cas at his place, like he wanted to. “I swear to God, Mom, I’m not coming if you say one more negative thing, got it?” Dean growls. He’s so rarely overtly angry with anyone that it seems to take his mother by surprise.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Do not blow this for me. I’ll see you tonight.” He hangs up before she can get another word in.

Dean’s not sure why his loving and usually pleasant mother is acting this way. She has always been very protective of her sons, he knows, and even more so since Sam’s experience and since Dean started winning big on the circuit. And yeah, she wasn’t very positive about some of Dean’s past relationships. But she’d been positive about Cas (at first, anyway, though not so much lately), and this attitude seems extreme, even for her. He prays this doesn’t explode in his face.

After he makes the vegan meal he’ll bring with him, he takes extra care to get ready, gelling his hair and picking out jeans that look good but will still give him room to sit comfortably for a while. He pairs them with a nice t-shirt and jacket. Satisfied, he jumps into his car and drives to Cas’ to pick him up. Sam and Jess idle in front of the house, waiting. He asked them to drive up separately after telling them about Mom’s reaction. They agreed, not needing to ask more. They could probably tell Dean was still pissed.

When Cas opens the door, Dean is practically speechless (which is pretty rare, he can admit). Cas looks incredible in a nice pair of tan pants and a navy shirt, rolled up to see his tanned, muscled forearms and open at the neck to see the dip above his collarbone that Dean wants to taste. The feelings that have been weaving their way into his heart make him a little tongue-tied, or maybe just brain-tied, because he can’t think of the right thing to say. He mumbles whatever happens to escape from his mouth. He knows he fumbles, but he doesn’t for the life of him know how as he drinks him in with his eyes. It makes Cas turn a little pink, or that could be the glow of the late-day sun. He asks if he cleans up alright, which makes Dean want to laugh hysterically at the understatement.

He lets Cas drive Baby, because he thinks it’ll make him feel better to be in control, and damn, he looks good. The sun bounces off the gold of his aviators and the knuckles of his hands, highlighting the years of honest, skilled work he’s done with them.

“You clean up alright, too,” Cas says after a while, glancing at him as he ruffles his hair with a nervous hand. “I didn’t tell you before. You look great.”

“Aww, you make me blush, Cas,” he teases. Cas chuckles. They talk about Dean’s childhood for most of the way up, sprinkled with little anecdotes here and there from Cas’. Dean grabs every one he can and tries to commit them to memory.

They arrive, Jess and Sam just behind them. Sam raises his brows in question to Dean as he glances at where Cas emerged. Dean smiles and shrugs. Sam gives an amused huff and a look that says he’ll be teasing Dean about this one for a while.
He has to admit that dinner smells great, though his Vegan Mushroom Stroganoff smells fantastic, too. Cas was so damn grateful when he mentioned it on the way up. He couldn’t see his eyes, but the way he pressed his lips together and reached for his hand said it all. Dean’s pretty sure he could’ve flown to his parents’ house just on the high of Cas’ quiet joy. His mother doesn’t say anything as he places the dish on the table.

“Cas, pleased to meet you,” Dean and Sam’s dad, John, says. He extends his hand. Cas takes it and shakes firmly.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Winchester,” Cas says smoothly, all toothy charm.

“John, please,” his dad insists. “And this is my wife, Mary.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Winchester,” Cas says as he turns and extends a hand to his mom, who reluctantly takes it. “I realize I am a last-minute intruder, so thank you for allowing me into your home.”

“It’s fine,” she says dismissively as she turns away. Dean frowns, but the smile doesn’t move from Cas’ face. He turns back to John and asks him about his fishing hobby, something Dean mentioned when they first met. Dean is surprised (but not really) that he remembers and relieved that it’s not a big deal to Cas, even if it doesn’t match his own beliefs. He listens to them talk amiably and feels good that they seems to be connecting well.

When they sit to eat, Dean feels conflicted. He can’t turn down the dinner his mom made specifically with him in mind, yet he feels bad for eating all of this stuff with Cas right next to him. He knows Cas is fine with it — he assured him of such, several times, on the way up — but it still feels strange, especially since his own meat consumption has decreased. Sam and Jess look a little uncomfortable, too, but they roll with it and take the food they’re given. He accepts the plate from his mother and can’t deny the watering of his mouth or the grumbling of his belly. He scoops a helping of the vegan stroganoff on his plate as well and keeps it nearby for Cas to take when his mother gives him his plate. His hunger pangs turn into a rolling sickness as his mother starts to hand Cas a plate full of everything that everyone else got rather than an empty one. Cas smiles at her.

“Thank you, Mrs. Winchester, truly,” he says, smooth and deep, “but I won’t be eating the meal you’re serving tonight. I apologize. I would have informed you so you didn’t trouble yourself with the extra plate had I realized you didn’t know.” But she did know, and it confuses Dean. She didn’t forget already, did she?

“Why not?” she asks in a challenging tone.

“I’m vegan,” he starts, “But more importantly, to partake of something when one wasn’t invited by the host would be rather presumptuous and rude of me. I know I am intruding on your time with your family, and I had no intention of inconveniencing you or shortchanging you of your meal. I am merely here to share in Dean’s company with all of you before he leaves. Please enjoy yourselves and your food.”

She pulls back the plate. “So you’re not eating.”

“I had no intention to, Mrs. Winchester.”

“You were just going to let yourself starve.”

“It would not be the first time I went without food.” He says it so matter-of-factly, with a friendly,
I’m doing great! kind of smile, that it makes Dean shiver. He knows there must be more truth there than Cas is letting on. The conflict, too, is making him shake. He’s never liked conflict, and this one is making him particularly uncomfortable. He is nearly frozen with it.

“Suit yourself,” his mother says just as Dean comes to his senses with, “Um, well, hey! I made this for you, so eating this isn’t presumptuous or rude or whatever. I’m gonna grab a plate for you.” Dean stands so fast he nearly knocks his chair over. Cas looks up at him with concern, making sure he’s okay, as if Cas should be concerned about him when Cas is the one being raked over the coals for no reason. Everyone is looking at Mary strangely except for Cas, who looks placid.

“Thank you, Dean,” Cas says quietly when Dean hands him a plate with a heaping serving of the stroganoff. Dean smiles and tries to read what Cas is thinking, but he’s a blank canvas. Jess asks for the dish of stroganoff and the serving spoon, distracting him. He’s grateful to see Jess and Sam each take generous helpings. Even his father takes some. His mother does not.

Dean’s father starts talking about his latest customer, and the atmosphere calms a bit. Dean begins to relax when Jess tells funny stories about work (mostly about her fellow EMTs, who sound like riots to work with), and he grows more relaxed when his father asks him about the upcoming race. He talks about his training regimen, Cas listening with his usual attentiveness that always makes Dean squirm a little in the best way. The smile hasn’t left his face, but it appears softer.

“So,” Mary says eventually, “Dean has spoken about you quite a bit, Cas.”

Cas places his fork down and his hands loosely in his lap while focusing on Mary. “I’m flattered. You have a wonderful son.”

“Yes, I do. Which is why I’m confused.”

“Mom,” Dean growls.

“I just wonder about your motivations,” she continues, ignoring Dean’s warning. “My son is handsome, talented, and quite well-off financially. But you don’t want to date him ‘yet,’” she says, reminding Dean of what he’d told her about Cas (“He doesn’t want to yet, but I think one day he will”).

“Mom…”

“It’s alright, Dean,” Cas says serenely, still looking at Mary. He doesn’t know how Cas is staying so damn calm when Dean wants to explode.

“And he doesn’t seem to know a lot about you, which is strange to me.”

“Mary,” his father sighs. Cas says nothing. He sits with the same smile on his face.

Undeterred, Mary continues, “My son is very kind-hearted and trusting of people, as I’m sure you’ve figured out. So I can’t help but wonder whether you are truly uninterested in dating him and just haven’t told him or whether you are trying to string him along until you finally accept a date and he’s so smitten with you that you know you’ll be able to take advantage of him. And I can’t help but think that you’re hiding who you really are.”

If Cas wasn’t blinking or breathing, Dean would think he’s a mannequin. His smile hasn’t moved.

“Well?” Mary demands.

“I apologize, was there a question that I missed?” Cas asks innocently. Dean wants to hoot at what
he knows is Cas’ purposeful, put-upon ignorance. Mary frowns.

“Are you interested in Dean?”

“Dean knows of my interest.”

“I don’t.”

“Since you appear to be concerned about your son’s well-being, I will answer rather than insist that it is a matter only between Dean and I. Yes, I am interested in him. I have no interest in ‘stringing him along.”

“Then why wait?”

“Mom, that is not your—”

“My history makes me cautious.”

“Your ‘history.’ And what, pray tell, is in your ‘history’ that makes you so hesitant?”

“Cas, you don’t—”

“Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse by my wife.”

The table falls into dead silence. Mary looks stunned. Sam and their father have their eyes closed, as if they can get away if they just can’t see it in front of them. Jess looks like she’s about to cry. Dean is crying. Sexual abuse, too? Shit. Cas takes Dean’s hand under the table, squeezing it comfortably, his lips still firmly ticked upward as he faces Mary. He breathes evenly next to Dean’s own hitching chest.

“And you think my son would do that to you?” Mary asks, only slightly less aggressively than before.

“Absolutely not. I’ve seen nothing but goodness and light from your son, nothing but kind intentions and gentle acceptance of me exactly as I am. You and John must have done an exceptional job raising him, and he only continued his positive development on his own in adulthood.”

“So what is the problem, then, if you think my son is so great?”

“Sometimes the past still echoes in the present, Mrs. Winchester. At least for me.”

She squints her eyes, like she used to do when she thought one of her boys was lying, and Dean watches her apprehensively. She purses her lips and says, “I know abuse happens to men, and it’s horrible. However, I have to say I find it very hard to believe that a woman would be able to abuse a grown man sexually. Did you find out about our family? Is this a story you’ve concocted to make Dean feel bad for y—”

“Alright, that is fucking it,” Dean shouts as he slaps the table and stands, his voice the loudest amidst Jess and Dad’s voices telling Mary to back off. “We are done here. I don’t know where the hell you get off grilling him like he’s a fucking criminal, but it ends now. Cas, you ready to go?”

“Of course, Dean. Whenever you are. I don’t mind staying if you want more time with your family.”

“Absolutely fucking not. I don’t want another minute in this house with her. Sorry, Dad. It was nice
to see you.” Dean holds his hand out for Cas to take or not. He does, grasping Dean’s and smoothing it with his other hand like Dean is the one who needs the comfort. Maybe he is. Maybe he’s more upset than Cas… which is all kinds of disturbing and wrong. Cas should be fucking pissed. And thinking about who else should be pissed… Dean looks over at his brother, who stands slowly, Jess right with him. He locks eyes with Dean, and his eyes flash anger and hurt. He wasn’t abused sexually by Ruby, but the discussion clearly has him shaken. They nod at each other before Dean turns and walks out of the house with Cas, hand-in-hand, Sam and Jess at their heels and John holding Mary back as she calls for her sons. Neither answers.

Cas’ smile is gone the moment they leave the house. As they drive home, a million thoughts float around Dean’s mind, feathers on the wind that he just can’t catch. He feels awful, emotionally and physically. Cas stares at the road ahead, his head resting against the window. He wasn’t afraid to get in the car this time. Dean dreads arriving home, because when they get there he knows that all he’ll want to do is follow Cas into his house and hold him. He’s not sure if Cas will want that. He’s not sure if Cas will ever speak to him again. He pulls into Cas’ driveway with a boulder pressing on his chest. Cas opens the passenger door and turns, and Dean waits for the boulder to crush him to death.

“Would you like to come in, Dean?” Cas asks.

“Fuck, yes,” Dean replies, the pressure in his chest easing somewhat.

Cas leads him inside and resets his alarm, then invites him to sit on the couch. Cas sits next to him. “I’m starting to think an evening watching movies with you may have been preferable,” Cas says, referring to Dean’s original idea that he told him about on the way up. He’s attempting a joke, Dean knows, but Dean starts crying instead of laughing. Cas opens his arms, and Dean falls into them as apologies spill out of both of their mouths.

“I’m sorry my mother was such a bitch. She’s not usually like that. I don’t know what got into her,” Dean sobs. His heart aches for Cas, who’s experienced enough poor treatment in his life. He shouldn’t have gotten it from someplace Dean thought was a safe place.

“It’s alright, Dean,” Cas assures him. He rubs his back gently, just like the way he smooths varnish over a fine piece of wood. “It’s not your fault. I think she just thought of me as a threat.”

His sweet understanding only makes Dean cry harder. “Don’t defend her, or me. I should’ve… I mean I should’ve said something sooner, stopped her sooner…”

“Shh. That wasn’t your responsibility. Besides, I know what it feels like to be shocked into speechlessness.” He tucks Dean’s head under his own. Dean curls into the space. “I probably said too much and made things very uncomfortable for you and your family. I just wanted her to understand.”

Dean scoffs. “You weren’t the one making things weird. I don’t even know how you managed to stay so cool.”

“That part was easy,” Cas says. He moves back from Dean, so Dean scoots back to look at him. Cas clears his throat and smiles the same smile he wore for Dean’s parents. “Oh yes, Ms. Jones, I would love to work on that project for you. My dear wife sitting right next to me in our business meeting will be more than happy to take care of any financial arrangements. She’ll drop by the work site unannounced to make sure things are progressing nicely. Oh, that bruise? Just a hazard of the job, don’t you know. Hello, Doctor Smith. No, she didn’t mean to hit me with her car. Thought she had it in reverse, ha ha. No, I’m a carpenter and I get bruises all over my body all the time. Oh yes, April dear, you’re right. You always are. Of course I’m not angry at you. I’m never angry at
“Cas, sweetheart,” Dean whispers. They gaze at each other until, this time, Cas drops into Dean’s arms and tucks himself under Dean’s chin.

He wishes he could kiss him, wishes he could make love to him and show him just how much he loves him. Because he does. But he can’t, because they’re not there. They may never be, Dean thinks, though he hopes Cas will trust him enough someday.

“Why weren’t you like that with me?” Dean asks.

“You mean pretending everything was fine?”

“Yeah.”

“I tried, but I couldn’t keep it up. You were so genuine and you just kept showing up, kept caring for me, kept making me care for myself.”

“But you’re scared of me sometimes. You weren’t scared of my mom, but you’re still scared of me.”

“I don’t have to have a relationship with your parents. I just have to make sure they don’t harm me. I want a relationship with you, and that necessitates much more than just placating you. That involves sharing myself with you, being honest. It’s very frightening. It makes me very vulnerable.” Dean feels more than hears him chuckle sadly. “You could hurt me more than April did, Dean.”

Pain lances his heart at the words spoken so honestly. “I won’t, Cas.” He hugs him as if he can press the words into Cas’ soul. “I swear to God, I won’t.”

Cas nods, then withdraws from Dean’s arms. “Can we just… watch something mindless and sit together?”

“Yeah.” Dean presses the power button to the TV. He finds *American Pickers* and leaves it there. They like this show — no drama, no conflict, just a couple of friendly guys talking with friendly people about cool shit. They chat a little about the different things they see, but mostly they just sit and relax, hands clasped together. It’s what they both need.

Chapter End Notes

Surprised? ;) We’ll see more about all that later...

*Warnings for references to past physical, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse, and possible food withholding.*

Next chapter: So much good stuff — fluff! progress! relationship building! Yay!
Ah, some sweetness...

However, there is one warning in the end notes if you feel you need it. <3

The treetops are sharp and stippled against the azure sky. Some are vivid, like the red at Charlie’s that looks like a million cardinals are roosting in it, or the orange leaves of the tree in Sam and Jess’ yard that make it look like it’s on fire. Others are more muted, like the dull, spotted yellows of the trees down the street or the deep purple-reds around the neighborhood that look like burned-out, rusted cars. The tree in Castiel’s yard (well, Chuck’s) tends toward muted red-yellows. It is ordinary, but beautiful. Castiel has been picking up leaves regularly so the neighbor doesn’t get cranky. But he will have no time for that today. With his bag behind him, he walks to Sam and Jess’ house, a familiar, comfortable place now, and knocks. Sully greets him with his usual exuberance, and Jess greets him with a hug. She does that now, has ever since the day after the disastrous “meet the parents” fiasco. She was so upset when he came to the house to say goodbye to Dean that when she asked if she could hug him, he didn’t think twice. She hugged him the same way Dean does. He wondered if she’d asked him or if she’s just observant. He spent some time with her during the few days that Sam was away helping Dean move out of his apartment and driving his things back. During that time, she told him about how tough Mary had been on her at first. She also told him about Sam. Dean had alluded to Sam having some of his own experiences, but didn’t think it was his story to tell. Jess had no qualms about that, since she was a part of his healing story and since he had, apparently, given her permission. She shared her own story as the person who fell in love with Sam and had to watch him go through the painful process of putting himself back together. It gave him a unique perspective into Dean’s side of things — not that Dean’s in love with him, but still. It was hard to hear, but it made him work harder in therapy in the weeks Dean’s been gone.

“Hey, man, ready?” Sam asks behind his wife.

“Yes,” he smiles. They toss their bags into the trunk, climb into the vehicle (he has fewer qualms than he used to but he still makes sure he gets in first), and take off for the airport.

It’s his first vacation in… well, a very long time, anyway. He and Sam are going to surprise Dean at his show — in Las Vegas, of all places. He’s not looking forward to all the people, but he is looking forward to seeing Dean and making the return trip with him. Even if it has to be in his car and he could, potentially, leave him in the desert to die or something. Good Lord, Castiel, stop being dramatic. She probably would’ve done that, but he won’t. He worries some about sharing space for so long, particularly about the sleeping arrangements and the close quarters in which he’ll have to be very careful about dressing. But he can manage. He hopes. Mia seems confident in him, anyway.

“You have the skills to do this, Castiel.”

“Yes, I know. But there are so many unknowns.”
“There always will be. And yet there are many knowns, too. What do you know, Castiel?”

“I know the signs of danger. I know how to protect myself. I know how to get help. I know when to get out of a situation. I know how to say what I need.”

“And what do you believe?”

“I believe Dean is a safe person. I believe he has my best interests at heart. I believe he will try to protect or help me if needed. I believe the same about Sam.”

“And what are you working on believing?”

“That I’m worthy of Dean’s attention. That he will be happy to see me. That he will not reject me. That he will stop if I’m uncomfortable. That he will not hurt me. That soon I can say yes.”

He knows that some of his thoughts — what he believes and what he's working on believing — seem to contradict. Mia has assured him that this is not unusual when people are learning to think differently.

“Be brave, not unafraid, Castiel,” she’d reminded him.

*You will overcome. You already have.*

And so here he sits, after several intense sessions with Mia, just hours from seeing Dean. He thinks about the last time he saw him — the morning after the family dinner, before he and Sam left for California. He was still so angry, but not at Castiel.

“I don’t fucking get it, Cas.”

“I know, Dean. I’m sure she had her reasons.”

“Completely shitty ones. If she was so concerned about me and whether I’m being used or whatever, she should’ve talked to me.”

“Maybe she didn’t think you’d see it. Or maybe she didn’t think you’d tell her the truth.”

“Doesn’t matter. You don’t ambush people, you know? Especially someone your son...”

“What?”

“I’m gonna miss you so much.”

He still remembers the feeling of Dean’s broad palms on his back, his fingers gripping his shirt for dear life, the tickle of his shower-wet hair on his ear. He remembers the smell and sound and the feel of him and reminds himself that he’s close to having it once again. If Dean still wants him. *You know he does, Castiel. What does the evidence say?* He smiles as he thinks of the phone calls, the text messages, the silly videos of him singing what he’s come to think of as “their” song. Sam nudges him as their flight is called.

The flight is uneventful, and they pass the time pleasantly. They talk. Castiel looks around a lot, but not in an obvious way. Just enough to spot any concerns. They rent a car to drive to the event. As Sam unlocks the door, Castiel gets the brief, irrational thought that Sam might be motivated to harm him on behalf of his brother. He rolls his eyes at himself and gets in. *It could happen. You’re being ridiculous.*
They set the GPS and start out. Castiel takes in his surroundings. He’s been to many places, but not Las Vegas.

“My abuser’s name was Ruby,” Sam says out of nowhere. Castiel turns away from the window, but doesn’t look at him directly. He’s not sure if Sam would like that or not. “She was my girlfriend for several months in college. It started after we had an argument. She slapped me across the face. I was so surprised I didn’t know what to do. I just figured I’d really made her mad or something. I mean, that’s not an excuse for slapping someone, but... anyway, I apologized over and over. When we talked about it, she said that things happened in a different way than I remembered them. I was stressed, had a lot on my plate, so I thought maybe she was right. And she kept doing stuff like that until I thought I was nuts.”

“Gaslighting,” Castiel says.

“Yeah. That’s what it was, mostly. There was some physical stuff too — hitting, kicking — but I think the mental stuff was a lot worse.” Sam sighs and runs his hand through his hair. “I was having a hard time when I met her. I thought she was my angel, you know? But she was a demon in disguise. At least that’s what it felt like.”

Castiel nods.

“It took a long time and a lot of therapy and family support for me to trust anyone again. All I wanted to do was hide. Then I made some friends, and eventually I met Jess. I was kind of a mess. She helped me out.”

“Like Dean.”

Sam glances at Castiel. “Sort of. Jess and I started as friends, though, whereas you guys had the attraction right away.”

Castiel’s eyes flick toward him, then away. He doesn’t deny it.

“I just want you to know it gets better if you work on it, and you can have a good life. Dean really likes you. If you want a relationship with him, he’ll be good to you.”

Castiel nods again. He knows.

“Nicest guy in motocross,” Sam says with a grin. Castiel chuckles. Sam showed him an article from last year giving Dean that title. There were multiple pictures of Dean grinning that winning smile, throwing his head back in laughter, and talking with kids at charity events. He was beautiful. But none of them featured the smile that Castiel sees. His mouth upturns involuntarily as his eyes unfocus, thinking of his favorite athlete and how he should enjoy him while Dean still wants him.

The supercross event (apparently there’s supercross and motocross and Dean does both, though Castiel’s not sure of the difference other than location) is exciting and he enjoys it, even though he is wary of the people around him. He thought he’d feel a little better than he does, given the work he’s done, but there’s a lot of yelling and noise and people behind him. He tries to keep it in perspective. Focusing on Dean helps. Dean’s red and white pants and jersey are form-fitting and busy, logos all over the chest and sleeves. His helmet covers his handsome face, but Castiel still finds him incredibly attractive. It frightens and entralls him. He wants him, but how can he give himself to him? It would be like giving a child a gift for their birthday that they’ve begged for only to find it broken in the box. He doesn’t deserve a broken toy, and Lord knows he doesn’t want to see the disappointment on his face. He sighs. Perhaps... no. As open, as understanding as Dean has been, he doesn’t think he can ever share his ugliness with the gentle man. Sam breaks him from his
thoughts and points out Dean in the lead. He cheers Dean on as they come into the final lap. Another rider takes over the lead, and it’s neck and neck until the very end, when another rider comes from behind and wins. Dean ends in third. It’s not the first place he wanted, but it is an incredible achievement, and Castiel is proud of him. He only hopes Dean takes losing in stride. She never did.

“Come on, we’ll meet him at the exit.” Sam beckons him out of his seat and they wade through the masses until they find the area where the riders will be leaving. Bikes are being packed and fans are standing around to catch the attention of the riders for a few words or an autograph or a selfie or perhaps more. He stands away from the crowd, back against a solid wall, where he can see everything and no one can sneak behind him. Sam is talking to someone, an older man. He calls Castiel over.

“This is Rufus. He’s the crew chief for Dean’s team,” Sam explains. “He’s gonna get us in.”

Rufus eyes him up and down. “Let’s go,” he says gruffly. They are led to a dressing area where men are milling around in various states of undress. Among them, Castiel hears Dean’s voice, singing (as usual). There’s a crowd of people around him, cheering him on. No surprise there. He has always imagined Dean is a popular man.

“Wiggle wiggle wiggle wiggle wiggle, yeah, yeah!” he sings. “I’m sexy and I know it!” A towel goes flying over the heads of several riders, to hollers and catcalls.

“Hey, I’ll show you a good time, baby!” one voice, definitely male, cries out. Castiel isn’t sure if the man is serious or if it’s just banter. Either way, he feels inexplicably jealous. Well, maybe not inexplicably. He breathes through the sensation. He will not, and will never, be jealous or possessive of Dean or anyone. He will not become her. He catches Sam’s eyes flick his way, but his eyes stay fixed on Dean.

“You wish. Get outta here,” he says with an easy smile and a dismissive wave. He bends out of Castiel’s sight for a moment, presumably to cover what the towel now doesn’t.

“Come on, Winchester! You know you want this!” the man goads him as he gestures to his groin. Castiel focuses on releasing his fists at his sides. He flexes his fingers.

“I got a man,” he sings, making several of the men laugh; someone else sings “What’s your man got to do with me?” in response. Castiel guesses it’s a reference to some popular song. Dean is full of them.

“Shit, Bass, haven’t you heard him talk about his man? Fuckin’ guy turns water into wine. Caaaaaas,” another man says, his hand over his heart as he teases Dean. Castiel’s own heart beats wildly.

“Hey, I don’t sound like that!” He drags a t-shirt over his head, then turns and sees his brother. “Sammy! Yo guys, my little brother Sammy’s here!” Sam rolls his eyes. Castiel has heard, often, how much he hates being called Sammy. “And where is the lovely Jessica? Thought she was comin’ with you.”

“She stayed home. Didn’t want to see your ugly mug. I brought someone who could appreciate it.”

“What, a blind guy?” someone shouts, to barks of laughter.

“Not quite,” Sam says.

Castiel figures he should probably move, and frankly, now that Dean is so close, he really, really
wants to be with him. Dean follows Sam’s eyes until they land on Castiel. Seeing those springtime eyes directed toward him again takes Castiel’s breath away. He missed the warm sunlight of his face, of his very being. Dean seems lost for breath, too, staring at him with plush pink lips gently hanging open. So Castiel uses what little oxygen is left in his lungs to stride to Dean and, with the briefest communication with their eyes, falls into his embrace.

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Dean can hardly believe he’s here. *He’s here.* “I missed you so much,” he murmurs in Cas’ dark hair as he twines his arms around him and presses his body gently into Cas’.

“I know. Your daily videos confirmed that for me,” Cas teases. “I missed you too.”

“You see my run?”

“No, Dean. I just arrived minutes ago in my private jet simply to say hello before I take off for Monte Carlo.” Dean pulls him closer (but still loosely enough so he doesn’t feel trapped) as Cas’ body trembles with his suppressed laughter. Dean doesn’t even mind that it’s at his expense. “You were wonderful, by the way,” Cas adds.

“Wonderful, hmm? Not rugged or manly or badass or something?”

“I thought that was a given,” Cas smiles as he pulls back. “I’m very proud of you.”

Dean can feel monkeys swinging around in his brain, screaming in delight at the praise. “Thanks, Cas,” he manages.

“You did that on purpose,” he pouts.

Before Cas can confirm or deny the accusation, Sam clears his throat and Dean turns to find everyone watching them with amusement. “This is Cas,” he mutters to the floor, a shy smile wrinkling his lips as he points his head in Cas’ direction.

“Yeah, we guessed,” one of the newer guys, Poppy, says. He’s eighteen and has a real future in the sport. Dean thinks he’ll probably be the team’s next superstar. He gives Poppy the finger before turning back to Cas, who has that “fake it ’til you make it” smile on his face. *Time to go.*

“Alright, we’re outta here. See you guys!” Dean calls as he swiftly leads Cas and his brother out. Cas climbs into Baby with Dean while Sam takes the rental. He’s pleased that it wasn’t even a question for Cas.

“How’re you doing?” Dean asks him gently once they’re out of the lot and on the road.

“Better,” Cas sighs. He reaches his hand between them; Dean takes it with a happy sigh of his own. Dean fills the time with the news of the last twenty-four hours, since Cas is mostly up-to-date thanks to their frequent phone calls, and Cas listens as attentively as he always does. He seems fairly relaxed, which is gratifying. Maybe Cas doesn’t think Dean’s secretly plotting to harm him anymore. It breaks Dean’s heart, but as Jess said, he can’t take it personally. He knows Cas is working on it, and when you love someone, you stay patient and help when you can.

When they get back to the hotel, though, Dean’s a little lost on what to do. Cas said that he and Sam agreed to share a room to save on expenses, so he could bunk with them. He doesn’t think Cas
will want to share a bed, though. Hell, he’s not even sure if Cas was really on board with the room-sharing or if he just agreed to it. He doesn’t want to go back to the room he was sharing with Xavier, though, because he’s missed Cas so much that he can’t bear to be separated if he doesn’t have to be. He decides to share with Sam, who will probably bitch about it but tough shit. It’s the best solution he can think of.

“Hey, uh, I’ll share with Sam if you want. Unless you want your own room. Would that be better for you?” He tries to make the question as casual as possible so he doesn’t offend Cas. He wants him to feel supported, not coddled.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind sharing with you,” he says, but he’s lying. Dean can tell. It’s the smile. He wonders why Cas is using it with him.

“Cas.” He jiggles the hand he’s still holding. “Please don’t say something you don’t mean.”

Cas lowers his head and turns away. “This is so stupid,” he whispers.

“It’s not. Hey, we haven’t even been on a date yet. I wouldn’t expect you to just jump in bed with me.” He nudges his elbow and gives Cas a bright smile when he looks back.

Cas rolls his eyes and shakes his head, though it seems like it’s the result of some inner monologue and not something related to what Dean said. He sighs heavily. “Um, if you don’t mind sharing with Sam, just for tonight. It’s just been a lot of stuff today and… fuck. I’m sorry. It won’t be like this the whole trip.”

The whole trip? Dean frowns in confusion as he searches Cas’ face. “Whaddaya mean, the whole trip?”

Cas’ eyes widen a hair. He says, “Oh. Right. Um, I was hoping I could join you on your drive back.”

And here come the monkeys again, and he thinks the rest of their jungle friends have joined them, dancing on two feet and shaking maracas like some Disney cartoon. “You wanna come with me?”

Cas smiles shyly, genuinely. It’s beautiful. “Yes. If that’s okay.”

“If that’s okay, shit, Cas.” He wiggles in his seat, his excitement unable to stay confined to his goofy smile. “Of course it is! We’ll have a blast. How long do you have ‘til you gotta be back?”

A week. He has a glorious week with Cas. He was going to do the entire trip in two to three days, stopping only for sleep and food, just so he could get home as soon as possible. Dean smiles to himself. He’s never had someone he wanted to leave the road for. Even the couple of times he’s been in love before, it was never like this. He isn’t sure of the difference except that it’s Cas, with his bravery and strength and tenderheartedness and compassion. Cas thinks that he’s doing all the taking and none of the giving in their relationship, but it’s just not true. He just doesn’t see how he feeds Dean’s soul.

They manage to find a place that delivers that has a decent garden salad (“the fast food of vegans,” Cas calls them, since they’re available just about anywhere but usually aren’t fantastic), then they watch a little TV until they can’t keep their eyes open. Well, Dean and Sam can’t, anyway. He’s not sure about Cas, though he looks exhausted. Everyone takes a turn in the bathroom, Cas being the last. He wears sleep shorts and a long, baggy, tucked-in t-shirt. He almost looks like he’s going for a run, except for the sleepy look in his eyes. He falls into bed and pushes all the pillows onto the floor on the far side, not keeping even one to sleep on. He’s heard some people don’t sleep
with pillows but can’t imagine why. Dean smiles softly at him and wishes him good night before turning off the light. He falls asleep before his head hits his pillow, content in the presence and security of two of his favorite people.

A rolling sound wakes him some time later, and he squints his eyes open just in time to see Cas close the sliding glass door behind him. Panicked, he flings the covers off and scurries to the window, where he sees him sit on the patio. He blows a relieved breath out of puffed cheeks. He feared the worst. When he doesn’t return within a few minutes, though, he decides it might be better to check on him. Just in case. He opens the door as quietly as he can, knowing it will make enough noise to alert Cas to his presence but probably won’t wake Sam.

“Hey, Cas,” he says, keeping his voice low.

“Hello, Dean. I’m sorry for waking you.”

“S’okay. You alright?”

“Yes. I just needed some air to clear my foolish brain.”

Dean knows what that probably means. “Mind if I sit?” When Cas agrees, he sits on the plastic wicker-look loveseat next to him and asks, “What was it saying? Your brain.”

“That I was in danger. Just the presence of other people with me when I am sleeping is disconcerting. I think it’s why I reacted so… vigorously when I accidentally fell asleep with you and Sam woke us.”

Dean grumbles at the memory. He’s still annoyed about that.

“It’s alright, Dean.” He pats his arm. “It’s an old reaction. I’m working through it.”

Dean hesitates, but Cas told him to ask if he had questions. “Is this about her?”

“Mmmhmm. Sleep was… a, uh, vulnerable, uncertain sort of condition.”

Dean chews on his lip. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“I’m not sure I should. It’s… disturbing. I don’t want you to be troubled.”

Dean nods. If the woman can hit her own husband with her car, he figures she’s capable of a lot more. “I can take it. ‘Sides, I think it would help. I’d know how to avoid making things worse, you know?”

Cas sighs, a low, sad little breath. “Well, you should probably know, since I… since I would like to… spend more time with you.” Cas smiles a little and Dean is thrilled at the implication, but keeps his reaction to a soft smile in return. “Ummmm... what to say.... huh. You know, when it’s happened to you, it’s such a different thing than when you have to explain it to others.” He rubs his forehead.

“Would it help if I held your hand?” He waits for Cas to answer, keeping his hands in his lap. Cas offers his hand and Dean takes it, squeezing gently in reassurance.

“Um. Well, there’s plenty to say, I suppose, but the thing that’s been most on my mind is, uh... She, uh...” He sighs. “Twice I woke up to her choking me.”

“Cas, fuck,” Dean blurts, flinching involuntarily. He feels like he’s going to vomit. He can
practically feel the blood drain from his face.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no, I’m sorry, just... God, I hate that fucking bitch so much.”

“That makes two of us. Anyway, the first time I was startled, obviously, but not all that surprised, which should’ve been a clue to get the hell out, but I was so traumatized by then... well. I just looked at her as I struggled, but I tried to yield as much as possible and... I don’t know. She didn’t like that, maybe, or she wasn’t strong enough to do what she was hoping for or maybe it was just a game, but she stopped. The second time she caught me while I was on my stomach. I woke up with her on top of me, pressing her arm into my neck from behind and holding my face into my pillow. I nearly passed out when she finally let go.”

“Motherfucking bitch.” Dean trembles with rage. Cas rubs his knuckles with his thumb.

“I suppose I should consider myself lucky that it was only twice, or that she didn’t manage to kill me.”

“She ought to consider herself lucky she’s not in prison where she belongs,” Dean growls. Or dead like she deserves, Dean doesn’t say.

Cas hums. Whether it’s in agreement or about some other thought, he’s not sure. “So that’s why I’ve avoided you touching my neck,” he says.

Dean nods. “Makes sense.” They sit in silence until Dean realizes something and feels ill once again. “You barely knew me when I was asking you to help me in and out of my chair so we could walk. I had to put my arm around your neck. I’m so, so sorry. If I’d known—”

“It’s alright, Dean.” Dean scrutinizes him skeptically. Cas smiles. “Really. I figured I could knock you on your ass easily enough if I needed to.” Cas’ devilish little grin lightens the mood, and Dean laughs.

“Bet you still could,” Dean admits.

“Probably.”

He’s not sure if Cas is teasing or completely serious, but he’s here and he’s safe and he’s looking at Dean with that smile that turns Dean’s insides to melted butter. He can’t hold his gaze too long or he’ll get too self-conscious and goofy, and he wants to be strong for him. Instead, he watches his own fingers slide through Cas’, stroking each scar, each wrinkle and vein. After a few minutes of feeling Cas’ blue eyes peering at him, Cas shifts and stops Dean’s ministrations. He wonders if he’s done something wrong. The breath he was going to use to ask just that gets lodged in his throat when Cas takes his hand and holds it gently on the side of his neck as he rests his temple onto the back of the seat. “You don’t have to be afraid to touch me, and I don’t have to be afraid to let you. I just need practice.”

“Practice,” Dean repeats uncertainly.

“If you’re willing to be patient with me.” He looks at him with doe eyes and a hopeful smile and pour him on some popcorn, Dean is done.

“I am,” he assures him. He’d do anything Cas asked of him, he’s sure of it.

“Then can I try something?”
“Sure.”

Cas lifts Dean’s arm and scoots closer to him. He curls into his side, wrapping Dean’s arm around his neck until his hand rests near his heart. He takes his other hand and lets it rest gently near his Adam’s apple. He closes his eyes and settles. Dean’s pulse picks up, the excitement of being close to Cas buzzing in his veins. He starts stroking Cas’ throat with feather-light touches. He listens to Cas’ breathing — at first, controlled and light, and then, heavier and rhythmic and relaxed — and he marvels at the trust this man has placed in him.

“I’ve known you over four months now,” Cas murmurs. Dean feels the vibration of his words under his fingertips.

“Mmmhmm.”

“She was already abusing me by then,” Cas muses groggily. Dean’s not sure if he was supposed to hear it or not.

“I will never hurt you,” Dean promises into his hair. “Not on purpose, anyway. And if I do hurt you by mistake, I’ll make it right. And if I’m too stupid to know I hurt you, tell me. I never want to make you feel anything less than amazing. Promise me you’ll tell me? Cas?”

Dean tilts his head down to see Cas asleep in his arms. He wants to kiss him good night, just in the mop of hair tickling his nose, but he doesn’t. He won’t violate his trust. Instead, he continues to stroke his neck and hold him close until he falls asleep, his hand dropping to Cas’ shoulder and creating a little circle of safety just for them.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: road trip! :) (And so much fluff!)

*Warning for the following in this chapter: physical abuse (choking)

Songs referenced in this chapter:
“Sexy and I Know It,” LMFAO
“I Got a Man,” Positive K
The first day together went much better than he expected, especially given his emotional conversation with Dean outside the night before. He felt like he went over the top with the whole having him touch his neck thing, but Dean was so generous and kind. It felt incredible to be touched with such care, like he was precious. He remembers being touched gently, but the reverence in Dean’s touch was new. Most intimate touch prior to her had been fun, exciting, meant to titillate. Some of it had been affectionate and caring. But none had been quite like Dean’s.

They said goodbye to Sam at the airport after spending the day seeing the sights at Red Rock Canyon. He’d tucked a blanket around them when he found them outside that morning. It had woken Castiel, but he didn’t overreact this time. Sam smiled at them fondly, the way his mother used to smile when she would tuck him in at night or he did something particularly endearing. It made Castiel trust him just that little bit more. Sam’s smile never quite went away the rest of the day, although several times he saw him flash Dean a different kind of smile, a different look. Dean responded with that shy smile that always makes Castiel want to snuggle him. He thinks if he did, Dean would blush furiously. That always makes him want to snuggle him, too. And tease him. And maybe more. That still scares him, but not as much. Most of the time. Not until he remembers that he can’t really have him fully. Shame prickles behind his eyes whenever he thinks about it, so he tries not to think too long.

Last night was okay. When they got back from the airport, they stopped for takeout (another salad) and spent another night at the same hotel, each having their own bed. They watched *Planet Earth: Blue Planet II* and Dean marveled at the problem-solving skills of clownfish. It made Castiel smile. Dean fell asleep to the TV, and Castiel allowed himself to be lulled to sleep by the same ocean blue glow. Castiel only woke up twice, once to turn off the television and once to make sure all was well, he supposed. It was a fairly restful night, all things considered.

Most of today has been spent driving, though Dean stopped at a few flea markets so Castiel could look for interesting building materials or inspiration. Castiel didn’t even ask him to. He simply did it. “Just thought you’d like it” was his only explanation. Just when he thought Dean couldn’t be any more perfect, he does something so thoughtful that it strengthens his faith in humanity a little. Or at least his faith in him. They each picked up a couple of things. Castiel couldn’t believe they found the perfect mirror for the master bedroom. It’s a shame he has to give it to Chuck, he thinks, who’s never even used the master bedroom yet and might not even be there often enough to appreciate it, but it really does fit the image he has for the room. He worried about fitting it into the Impala’s trunk, but Dean reassured him that there’d be space since Sam brought all his stuff back in the moving truck a few weeks ago. Dean asked his opinion about refinishing a small medicine cabinet he found for Sam and Jess’ bathroom. When Castiel said he thought it was salvageable, Dean asked him if he could use his workshop and help him if he needed it, and of course he agreed, especially since they had such a great time working on the bookcase. It’s been a wonderful day, the kind of day he always hoped to have with someone special and important to him. Now they’re at a supermarket somewhere in Colorado to pick up some food for the evening. Dean is
acting like his usual self, which is to say he’s being goofy and lovable.

“Ever seen that show Whose Line Is It, Anyway?”

“Mmm, I don’t think so.”

“It’s improv. They do this one game where they do as many things with a prop as they can think of. Like this.” He grabs a banana from the bunch he’s holding, holds it to his ear like a telephone, and sings, “Hello? It’s me. I was wondering if after all this time you’d like to meet.” Then he straddles it and says, “Giddy up!” while neighing like a horse, followed by “Whoa, this Viagra isn’t working the way I expected!” as he holds it near his crotch. That one hits a little too close to home, but he knows Dean doesn’t know that and doesn’t mean anything by it. Dean moves on quickly as he sticks the fruit in his eye and affects an Australian accent, saying, “Crikey! My boomerang got its revenge!” It’s the accent that finally makes Castiel break his deadpan demeanor. He laughs.

“You missed your life’s calling.”

Dean grins. “I plan on living a long time. Got plenty of time to live the life I want. You do too, you know.” Castiel stares after him as he puts the banana in the cart with the rest and moves on to the trays of premade hummus and carrots. “You got me addicted to hummus,” he whines as he tosses a couple into the cart. Castiel shakes himself out of his trance and smiles at Dean’s half-hearted complaint.

“Hummus is a gateway,” Castiel warns. “Before you know it, you’ll be hooked on edamame and meeting your tofu dealer on a dark street corner.”

Dean throws his head back in laughter. His eyes squinch shut and his hand lands on Castiel’s arm before he remembers himself and removes it, his smile dropping slowly. Castiel takes his hand. “It’s alright. I don’t want you to be afraid,” he reassures him. He clasps two of his fingers and swings their arms between them. “Is this okay?” he asks.

Dean’s smile picks up where it left off. “Absolutely,” he grins. He squeezes Castiel’s hand and hums along to the music over the store’s sound system contentedly as they peruse the aisles.

Sneaking several glances at the man beside him, Castiel ponders Dean’s earlier statement, said innocently (or perhaps not, but meant to be helpful all the same). Got plenty of time to live the life I want. You do too, you know. How much time has he spent being afraid? Three years. Well, one and a half years, then a few months where you didn’t care enough about yourself to be afraid, then a few weeks when you had someone else to be afraid for, then another year being afraid of just about everyone. Before he falls back into painful memories, he grounds himself by focusing on the warmth of Dean’s hand in his. Dean must feel him shift a bit, because he looks at him and smiles so widely and easily it hurts. It hurts because he used to smile like that, too. It hurts because he wants to smile like that again. How many years did he smile like that? Far more than the years he hasn’t. Maybe he can’t have Dean as much as he wants him, for as long as he wants him, as intimately as he wants him. But it’s a long life. Maybe he can have something.

Dean has broken their grasp to pick up some almond milk. The song playing overhead is familiar to Castiel, something his father used to listen to in the workshop, maybe. Dean clearly knows it. He’s singing along, walking backwards and swaying his hips as he snaps with one hand and holds the milk like a microphone with the other. As it comes into the chorus, Castiel has to laugh at the irony, or coincidence, or divine intervention, or whatever it is that made this particular song play just at this time:

_I’m still standing, better than I ever did_
Looking like a true survivor, feeling like a little kid

I’m still standing, after all this time

Picking up the pieces of my life without you by my side

“I’m still standing, yeah, yeah, yeah!” Dean sings, oblivious to or unconcerned about whoever’s around him. What freedom he has. Castiel shakes his head fondly at the man who’s made him realize just how much life he has left to live.

“Yes,” Castiel says with a smile as wide as it used to be, many years ago.

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Dean stops singing, but the smile it brought to his lips remains. “Did you say something?”

Cas nods. His eyes are deep and sparkling blue even under the harsh fluorescent lights, and his smile transforms his already gorgeous face into something truly magnificent to behold. “I said yes.”

“Yes to what? I was just singing. I didn’t ask anything.”

“Yes, you did. A while back.” Dean furrows his brows in confusion, but Cas just watches him.

“Are you talking about the watermelon? I ended up getting it.” He points to the package of pre-cut melon.

“No.” The corners of his mouth quirk in amusement.

“I dunno, then. You’ll have to remind me.”

“You’ll remember.” He saunters down the aisle, leaving Dean standing alone and confused. As he reaches the endcap, he turns and shoots Dean that playful smile he’s seen a little more of recently. He’s purposely teasing Dean. What question…

“Holy shit! Are you serious?” he shouts in the middle of the store. He hears Cas cackle at his exclamation even as he tries to shush him. Dean doesn’t care about being loud, though, especially not now. He races to him, careful to keep enough of a berth to be certain he knows he’s not attacking him. “Are you serious? Yes? This is about the date, right? I hope? I’m gonna feel like an idiot if I’m wrong.”

“You’re not wrong,” Cas says. He rolls his lips together and looks at Dean hopefully. “If you still want to, I mean.”

“Dude!” he shouts with glee, raising his eyes to the ceiling like he’s in rapture before meeting Cas’ gaze. “You know I do,” he reminds him softly.

“It’s always good to have confirmation of the fact.”

Dean huffs a chuckle before opening his arms, checking with Cas before wrapping him in a huge hug. Dean is giggling and he can’t help it. He’s just so damn excited.

“You’d think you won the lottery,” Cas teases him.

“Are you fucking kidding me? I did win the damn lottery!”
Cas shakes his head. He’s grinning, though, and his cheeks are pink and he’s still in his arms and he could die of happiness right here. *Clean up in aisle 12! We have a human puddle between the allergy medications and the fancy shampoo!*

They finish up their groceries and head for the cash register. He’s still smiling.

“Hi, how are you tonight?” the cashier, a young woman named Kait according to her name tag, asks as they place their items on the belt.

“Awesome!” Dean answers. He glances at Cas, then back at Kait, who’s watching them with amusement.

“I see that. You look like you’re having a good evening.”

“I am. ‘Cause this guy just agreed to go on a date with me.” He thumbs proudly at Cas, who rolls his eyes but smiles anyway.

“Oh wow, congratulations!” She eyes them with sincere happiness before her brows knit together. “Did you just meet?”

“No!” Dean laughs. “No, I’ve been pestering him for months!”

“You weren’t pestering me,” Cas chides.

“Shame on you for keeping him waiting,” she smiles at Cas. It’s a joke, but Cas has dealt with enough shame.

“Nah, no shame needed. It was just a matter of timing.” Cas smiles at him with dewy, grateful eyes. He can’t help but stare back, lost in them as usual. He reaches for Cas’ hand and squeezes it.

“Oh wow,” she says, bringing both men’s attention back to her. “You guys have it bad. $51.70, please.”

Dean digs his credit card out of his wallet and runs it while Cas gathers the bags in his arms. “Got that right,” he grins.

“So where are you taking your man? And when?”

“Dunno. Wherever and whenever he wants. As long as I’m with him, I don’t care.”

“Aww. Well, I guess you’re a lucky guy then.”

“I am,” Cas interjects before Dean can answer. He smiles and blushes faintly as he waits at the end of the counter. Dean’s Disney animal friends are doing the cha cha slide in his gut. He giggles again, something he did very little of prior to Cas but can’t seem to stop doing now.

“Have a good time, guys,” Kait grins before waiting on her next customer, though Dean barely notices because… well, just look at the sight in front of him.

“Slide to the left, slide to the right,” Dean sings as they stroll toward the car. Those cartoon animals planted that damn song in his head.

“Take it back now y’all,” Cas responds.

Dean stops in the middle of the parking lot and stares. “Dude.”
“One hop this time,” Cas sings, then hops with a playful seriousness that’s all Cas. The bags bounce along with him. “Right foot, let’s stomp,” he continues, stomping his foot. He’s dancing the cha cha slide in the middle of the lot and Dean absolutely loves it. Loves him.

“Left foot, let’s stomp,” Dean responds, and they both stomp. “Cha cha real smooth.” The two grown men glide effortlessly to the car, swaying their hips and hands, before bursting into laughter.

“Okay, I have to know how you know that,” Dean insists. He starts the engine but turns toward Cas to wait for the answer. “C’mon, out with it.”

Cas chuckles. “Well, I could tell you that it’s because we went to my younger cousin’s cheering competitions, which is true, but it’s also because…” he sighs and mumbles, “I was a cheerleader.”

“What?” Dean squeals in disbelief.

Cas folds his arms. “We were required to do a sport in high school each season and I didn’t like anything else in the winter!”

The affection he feels for Cas is overwhelming. “God, you’re awesome,” he tells Cas. He rolls his gorgeous blue eyes but smiles anyway.

In the comfortable quiet that follows, Dean ponders Kait’s questions. He’s not sure where, but like he told her, he really doesn’t care. He’d like to make it special, though, so he hopes maybe the when will help him figure out the where. He’s sort of afraid to ask about the when, though. He just agreed to a date with him after months. He doesn’t want to scare him off before they start. Cas, though, assuages his worry before it can really ramp up too high.

“How about Thursday night?” Cas asks as if he knew Dean was thinking (obsessively) about just that topic. Maybe he did. Cas is good at reading people. “Unless you think that’s too soon,” he adds. Dean realizes he probably got lost in his own thoughts.

“Hell no,” Dean says. “Gives us a little time to plan, look stuff up wherever we end up. Can I, uh, take you out somewhere or would you rather lie low?”

“Why don’t we see what feels right? We can see where we are and go from there.”

“Perfect,” Dean smiles as he turns to Cas at a red light. It’s kind of what they’ve done throughout their relationship anyway.

That night, Cas falls asleep before Dean. He watches him sleep for a short while. Cas has overcome so much in the last few months, and overcame even more before that. He still has his secrets. Maybe he always will. But there’s a hopefulness in his eyes, a sense of trust and faith that seems to grow with every touch, every word, every day that passes. Dean just has to be patient. He sleeps, dreaming of the Disney monkeys feeding them a feast.

Chapter End Notes

Referenced in this chapter:
Planet Earth: Blue Planet II
WhoseLine Is It, Anyway?
I’m Still Standing by Elton John
Cha Cha Slide by DJ Casper

So, true story, I got the entire idea for Dean singing and Cas’ date acceptance when “I’m Still Standing” played over the sound system when I was doing groceries and I sang along to it. My spouse was probably less impressed than Cas was. ;)

Next time: the date!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Date day! <3

There are brief mentions of the abuse Cas suffered, but nothing that hasn’t been said overtly or insinuated previously.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why don’t we make the whole day a date?” Dean asks a couple of nights later, on Wednesday, as they munch on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in Ohio. “Like you know how they do progressive dinners? You go to one house for drinks, another for appetizers, another for the main course, and another for dessert?”

“I always thought that would be fun to do someday,” Castiel muses aloud. “So each stop we make is a part of the date?”

“Yeah, each thing we do is part of the whole. So we start with breakfast, then we do, I dunno, leaf peeping or something, then we do lunch and antiquing or junk hunting or whatever, then we do a nice dinner or whatever you feel like.”

“That will make quite the first date story.”

“Right? Plus the whole day will feel special.”

“Hmm. You are quite the romantic.”

“Nah, just… I don’t know, just wanna make it special.” He bites his lip and blushes furiously and it makes Castiel’s heart leap. It’s an unusual feeling. Well, not around Dean, but in general. As he watches him, though, he thinks he sees a hint of anxiety. A thought crosses his mind that worries him.

“Dean, you aren’t suggesting this because you think it’ll be your only chance, are you?”

“No! No, of course not!” he says indignantly before mumbling, “Maybe.”

“Dean.” Castiel forces air roughly from his lungs. Sometimes the rage he feels toward her for making something that used to be so easy so hard is overwhelming. “Dean,” he says again, gently. “I know I’ve dragged this process out much longer than what is reasonable. If you had known me before, I suspect we would’ve been dating for some time now, because I would’ve accepted your invitation much sooner or because I would have asked you myself. I wasn’t always this hesitant. I used to trust easily and date easily and touch easily. She has made me something I never was. But I know somewhere in here, I still exist. And I know that every day, I trust you more and more. I like you, Dean. Very much. I don’t know how I’ll do with this date, but I’m very hopeful, and I’m fairly certain even before we have this date that I don’t want it to be the last. My fear is your willingness. But if you’re rushing all this out of fear that I won’t be interested after our date, I don’t think it will be necessary.”

“Yeah,” he admits. “I got scared. But I really do want to make it special, too. For you, ‘cause you
deserve it, you know?”

“I know you think so,” Castiel says, trying not to fall into old thought patterns but still not quite able to believe he deserves Dean’s attentions just yet. “It does feel good. I haven’t had a proper first date since I was a teenager.”

“Really? Nobody wined and dined you?”

“Not really, no. Not for a first date, anyway.”

“Good thing you met me, then.”

“A very, very good thing.” He smiles, making Dean lick his lips and squirm. His eyes alight on the quick movement before he takes his hand. Dean smiles as he twines their fingers together. The road trip has been good for them. Castiel has been able to practice letting Dean closer, and Dean has been a willing participant. He has gently rested his arm across his shoulders and neck a few times as they’ve sat in the car eating lunch, or watched the sun set, or hugged. Dean gives the best hugs Castiel’s ever had, and he finds himself gravitating more toward the man. He seems to be a cuddler, sighing in contentment every time Castiel wraps his arms around him and holds him close.

“Have you ever been in love before, Cas?” he asks.

“Love. Well, yes,” he answers honestly. “I think I was, anyway. His name was — get this — Balthazar, like one of the Three Wise Men. We met at a bar, of all the cliché places.”

“Hmm. Never pictured you for a bar guy. Didn’t know you drank.”

“I used to visit bars and clubs and whatnot, and I’m not against drinking. I just… don’t do it around others these days.” Dean nods. Castiel thinks he reads between the lines on that one. “Anyway, we got together, and after a few hookups we decided to date. I didn’t tell my family about him because I wasn’t out to them. Catholic family and all. I wasn’t sure how they’d react, and I didn’t want all the drama if it wasn’t going to be a serious thing. They lived in Rhode Island and I was in New York, so it was easy to cover up. But after a while my feelings grew, and it became more difficult to pretend.” He pauses. “God, I’ve been keeping secrets for a long time.” Dean caresses his hand and Castiel nearly purrs, feeling like a cat under Dean’s warm palm. “Eventually, I decided it was time. I had been away from my family and on my own long enough to feel strong and independent, and I had stopped practicing my Catholic faith strictly, so I felt less conflicted about finally coming out to my family. I loved him and wanted us to have a future. But as it turns out, he didn’t feel the same way.” Castiel stops to take a breath. The rejection has become a detached wistfulness in his mind now. “He didn’t love me anymore. He had once, he said, but he’d fallen out of love. I asked him if it had to do with me not being out to my family, and told him I was ready to do that. But he said it wasn’t that. I’d become… boring to him. I was working a job I loved and I was enjoying taking care of myself with diet and exercise, so I was getting out of the bar scene and the other crap that young adults do and he wasn’t ready to leave that. And… well, he’d wanted me to bottom and I hadn’t wanted to, and though he didn’t say so I suspect he was tired of waiting. The funny part is that the night he broke up with me, I was ready to agree to it. It took me a long time to get to the point where I was ready, and I… well, I was pretty upset about the whole thing, because I had psyched myself up for it. Weird as it might sound, I was, um… ‘saving myself’ in that way, I guess you could say. I figured if I ever fell in love with a man, there would be something special we could share that I’d never shared with anyone, even though I didn’t save myself in any particular way in case I fell in love with a woman…” He huffs a small chuckle of self-discovery, thinking about how he’d always been a little more sexually and romantically attracted to men but had never been able to articulate it before. Dean smiles and smooths a lock of Cas’ hair affectionately; it makes him warm and self-conscious about what he’s saying. He shrugs. “I don’t know, it made
sense at the time. Anyway, I took small comfort in the fact that at least I didn’t give myself to him that way.” He loses his train of thought for a moment, a painful reminder threatening to swallow him whole. He shoves it away forcefully and refocuses. “When I left, I found myself at a friend’s party, where I met April, and… well, you know the rest.”

Dean watches him, waiting without any sort of expectation as he traces the bones in Castiel’s hands. He hadn’t noticed Dean take his other hand, probably because it felt comforting rather than threatening. He smiles, because that’s progress.

“Wanna see the douchebag?” Castiel asks suddenly, using a word he knows will make Dean laugh. It does. He reluctantly pulls his hands out of Dean’s and does a Facebook search on his phone until he finds his ex’s profile. He hasn’t looked in years. He certainly doesn’t go onto his own page. It’s probably closed by now due to inactivity or something. Balthazar’s profile is public, always has been. He’s never cared about privacy.

“Look at that jerk,” Dean jokes, pointing to the profile photo of Balthazar with his two dogs. Castiel laughs. He missed those dogs as much as he missed Balthazar when things ended. Maybe more. Balthazar has aged a bit. Hard living, probably, or maybe they’ve all aged and Castiel just hasn’t noticed.

“He’s not, really,” Castiel admits. “It’s not his fault he didn’t have feelings for me anymore. He just wanted something else at the time.”

“His loss,” Dean mumbles. “Any pictures of you in here, do you think?”

“Probably.” He scrolls through a few years of photos until he finds one.

“Oh my God, look at your baby face!” Dean squeals. “Fucking adorable. Aww, here’s another one. Damn, dude,” he glances appreciatively at Castiel, who warms all over at the attention. “People usually pick people who are the same level of attractiveness as they are. He definitely came out ahead here.”

“He’s an attractive person, Dean,” Castiel defends his ex, but then, both because it’s true and because he loves seeing Dean all bashful, he adds, “Of course, you’re much, much hotter than he is.” He shouldn’t laugh at Dean choking on his drink, but he does. He rubs his back until he recovers.

“That wasn’t fair,” Dean chides.

“What’s unfair about the truth? Besides, you were complimenting me, I believe.”

“Course I was. You’re fucking hot. I know you know that I think that.”

“I... guessed it, yes.” They laugh together before chewing on their sandwiches in silence.

“I’ve been in love a couple of times before,” Dean says eventually. He pulls out his phone and flips to some old photos.

“Talk about a baby face,” Castiel teases him. He’s so beautiful, with smooth skin and green eyes and a taut body — not much different than now, really, except for a few more scars and laugh lines. If they’d met before, Castiel knows he would’ve been attracted to him and asked him out. Not because of his physical beauty, though that alone is a compelling reason, but because of his inner beauty that is so abundant it shines through his eyes. He notices the woman next to him, a beauty in her own right.
“That’s Lisa. Dated her for a year. Loved her, I think, but I just couldn’t be what she needed, you know? I was either out on the road or practicing and shit, and it took up most of my time. She wanted me around more so we could go out, hang with friends, party, do couple things. But I loved what I was doing and, to be honest, I didn’t feel strongly enough about her to give it up when she asked me to.”

“She asked you to give up something you loved? Your career?”

“Yeah. I mean I don’t blame her. It’s like you said before about Balthazar just wanting something else at the time. That was us. We were young and at different places in our lives. We ended it as friends and she found someone else and did her thing. Ended up having a baby with some other dude. She’s doing well though, got a great guy.

“And then there was Nick. He was like a fuckin’ siren call. I fell hard. We burned hot for a while, but to be honest our love was superficial, though it took me a while to see it.” He pauses in thought. “My mother only met him once, but she fuckin’ hated him. I don’t think she liked either one of them, really, but she couldn’t get to know Lisa ‘cause I lived so far away. She worried that she was trying to stop me from chasing my dreams or something, which… well, I guess was true, but it wasn’t malicious. She would’ve come around to her, though, I think. But Nick was kind of self-centered and not very forthcoming and she didn’t like that. Plus, I started seeing him during everything with Sam, and my mom was suspicious of everyone. She thought he was using me. I mean, she was right, but I think we were using each other. He was using me for my money and a place to live, and I was using him so I wouldn’t have to be alone.”

“You don’t like being alone?”

“Does anyone?”

Castiel shrugs. He’s been alone for so long that he thought he liked it, thought he was content because he was safe. But maybe not.

“I don’t mind being alone, not as much as I used to,” Dean continues. “I’ve found the value in it. But I guess at the time, with all the shit with Sammy, I just wanted someone around, you know?”

Dean looks as if he feels guilty for trying to meet one of his basic human needs, and it tears Castiel up. He rubs his hand over Dean’s. “Nothing wrong with that.”

“Nah, but it’s not much to build a life on. I want someone I want to be around, someone who I feel alive with, you know?”

Castiel gazes at Dean, and there’s a small, significant silence between them that says more than words ever could. Dean’s perfectly summarized the amalgam of feelings that always swirls like incense in Castiel’s chest when he’s with him. Alive. He feels alive with Dean.

“Yes. I know.”

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Dean’s eyes pop open at 5:22 a.m. Today’s the day, and Dean can’t wait another minute to start, though he has to. He turns toward Cas, who’s still sleeping. He wonders if his current position — facing Dean, with his hands curled in front of his face as if protecting himself — is purposeful or not. It’s hard, knowing that Cas still doesn’t trust him one hundred percent. But he knows why, knows it doesn’t have anything to do with him personally. Cas even told him so. Still, it sucks. He wishes he could meet this woman, just once, and… yell at her. Hit her with a car. Whatever.
Cas’ pictures — the ones he showed him last night when they talked — made him a little sad. In them, he saw a relaxed, happy Cas, free of the trauma that came soon after. He wishes that Cas had never known that pain, even though he knows it means they never would’ve met. He’d rather have a Cas out there that has never been violated in the ways he’s been violated, ways that Dean knows he doesn’t know the extent of just yet. He has a pretty good idea of the physical and emotional stuff, he thinks — the car and and Apollo and the choking, obviously, but as they’ve gotten to know each other Cas has told him about the hitting, the occasional food withholding (and suspected tampering, though he was never able to prove that conclusively), and the degradation and tracking his movements and trying to make him think he was crazy. He’s not naïve enough to believe he’s heard everything, though. He doesn’t know anything about the sexual stuff, because Cas hasn’t told him any details. And he’s not sure about the babies, if those were lies or if they were real and whether he grieved their loss. He hasn’t dared to ask, not wanting to make him relive the pain. But maybe he will someday, if he feels brave enough or if there’s a good opening or if they progress to the point of having kids. He huffs to himself. *Slow down, Dean, Jesus, don’t scare the guy.* But he smiles, too, because he loves him. He loves him more than he’s ever loved a partner. And though his experiences have changed him, they are changes that have only shown just how beautiful a man he is — a man who cradles children, who doesn’t eat animals, who helps others even at his own cost. As Dean’s watching him, Cas’ eyes open. They are immediately on alert, like a soldier or a firefighter whose ability to wake quickly is vital to their lives or the lives of others. Perhaps it was vital to his life at one time. He wonders if he overslept before everything, if he woke slowly and allowed himself time to adjust to the new day. “Hey, Cas,” he greets him quietly, his voice a low rumble from hours of disuse.

“Good morning, Dean,” Cas rumbles back, his voice in a similar state.

“Have you ever slept in late?”

Cas raises an eyebrow at him. “What time is it?”

“5:30.”

“Then yes. Today, for example. I’m usually awake by 5:00.”

Dean scoffs. “5:30's hardly sleeping in, dude.”

“Then you don’t know what a feat it is for me to sleep through the night, and even a little late, with someone else in the room.” Cas stands and smiles at him softly as he heads to the bathroom. Dean watches after him and sighs. *It’s all so magical* rings in his brain. What movie is that from? That’s going to bug him all day.

“So how would you like to start our date?” Cas asks with a smile when he returns, sitting across from Dean and breaking into his musing. He grins. Cas seems as excited as he is.

“Bagels?”

“A quick run, then bagels,” Cas says decisively, patting his thigh before grabbing his bag and heading back into the bathroom to dress.

The tiny, foreign hint of command in his voice and the heat from his hand radiate throughout Dean’s body, sending waves of a different sort of heat pulsing through his bloodstream. “What kind of weirdo goes for a run on a date?” he calls to dissipate the lust curling its tendrils through his muscles and around his bones.
“The ‘us’ kind of weirdos,” Cas responds through the bathroom door. *Us.* Dean flings himself backwards onto his bed and smiles stupidly at the ceiling.

They compromise and start their date officially by picking up bagels, which they take to go so they can run a trail at Cuyahoga National Park before they head out onto the open road once again. After that, Dean lets Cas drive for a while because he’s sore from the run and Cas looks as fresh as a damn daisy. They talk about road games they played as kids, then play a few. Dean laughs uproariously at the phrases Cas makes up whenever they see plates with letters. “Delicious Sugar Daddy” is one of his favorites. Dean’s generally involve some sort of bodily function. He’s a guy, what can he say? At lunchtime they pull off the highway and picnic at a cute little park (though Dean would never admit to using the word *cute* to describe it).

“Do you mind if I surprise you with a detour?” Cas asks as they clean up after lunch. “It’ll add a little time but we’re doing well, I think.”

“I love surprises,” Dean enthuses, because one, he really does, and two, because Cas has this little twinkle in his eyes and he planned something for their date and Dean is just so damn smitten.

Cas takes the wheel once again and Dean is content to let him, trusting him completely. He notices as the days have passed that Cas seems less and less nervous about the car, which is awesome because he wants Cas and Baby to be good friends. He closes his eyes for a bit, his early wake-up catching up to him. He wakes to Cas rubbing his arm gently. “We’re here,” he says, just above a whisper. He imagines Cas waking him like that every morning and sighs through smiling lips.

“Where is here?” Dean asks until he sees it: *America on Wheels: A Museum of Over the Road Transportation.* “Duuuude,” he says dreamily as he gawks. He turns to see Cas grinning at him. “Dude,” he says again, with a shy smile and a shake of his head.

“Come on,” Cas urges him.

As with most of the places they’ve gone over the last few days, Cas checks it out very carefully, scanning the room for exits and anywhere he could be trapped. He avoids corners, Dean notices, and he studiously avoids having people at his back as much as possible. He relaxes quickly, though, because it’s fairly quiet there today and because he’s holding Dean’s hand (he hopes that’s part of the reason, anyway), so Dean relaxes, too. Dean flits from exhibit to exhibit — race cars! children’s cars! trucks! oooh, the motorcycles! — and then lingers at the restoration area, where he checks out different cars at various states of restoration. Dean is in car geek heaven, while Cas seems content to listen to him ramble. When they leave a couple of hours later, Dean is all smiles. So is Cas, which Dean finds curious.

“Did you like it?” he asks.

“I did. The history was interesting. But truthfully, my favorite part was how much you enjoyed it.”

God, Dean wants to kiss him.

Dean takes over the driving and they make their way through New York. It occurs to Dean that he doesn’t even know where in New York Cas lived, and he has no idea if this is triggering any feelings for him or not. He seems quiet but okay. Dean keeps him occupied by talking his ear off about the museum and about cars and bikes he’d love to own someday. Cas listens and seems to appreciate the distraction.

By late afternoon, they’ve crossed into Connecticut and are contemplating dinner. “Alright, you wanna look up someplace we can eat, Cas?”
“Actually, um, I know of a place. It’s a little pricey, but I’ve been there a couple of times. It’s very good and it has a lot of vegan options…”

Dean lights up. “That’s awesome! Let’s go! And my treat, this is our date. Don’t even try to argue with me,” he says when he sees Cas start to open his mouth. He closes it and stares shyly at his phone, which makes Dean chew on his lip and smile like a fool.

They sit down to dinner at Flora, and Dean’s nerves ramp up. It really feels like a date now. They order an appetizer (hummus, yes!) and drinks (nothing alcoholic — Cas seems calm and settled with him and Dean wants that to continue) and Dean simply watches Cas look around the place, chin resting on the heel of his hand. After their drinks and appetizer arrive and they order dinner, he thinks back to what Cas said on the way. “You’ve been here?” he asks.

“Yes. I was… visiting my brother.”

Dean is blindsided. He knew that Cas’ brother lived in Connecticut, but so close? “Is he nearby?”

“About ten minutes from here.”

Oh shit. Whoa. Dean feels completely out of his element as Cas stares at the wall. What does he say? How is Cas feeling? Was it a mistake to come here? Or maybe, just maybe… “Been a long time.”

“Yes.”

“Cas…” He waits until Cas is looking at him, then screws up his courage. “What do they think happened to you?”

“I have no idea.”

“Wanna find out?” he asks, waving his phone. Cas looks at it with a mixture of fear and longing, the what if and just try that Dean knows so well from Sam.

“Okay,” he says on a tiny breath.

Upon a quick Google search of Castiel Novak (who lived in Albany, apparently), it seems that the prevailing theory is that they have no idea what happened. A few people think he’s dead. His wife played the worried spouse for a while, asking the public for any information. She seemed to play up the drama of it all and insinuated that he may have been taken against his will. His family had little to say other than they hoped he was alright. Gabriel, when interviewed, said, “We looked everywhere we could think of —Schenectady, NYC, Poughkeepsie— but we couldn’t find him anywhere.” It doesn’t mean anything to Dean, but Cas gasps.

“That was our code word for trouble when we were kids,” he explains. “I think he was trying to tell me that he knew. I didn’t think any of them knew what was happening. Maybe he figured it out.”

“Wow. Maybe he did,” Dean says. Their meal arrives and they each take a few bites before Dean asks, “You wanna go see him?”

“I can’t. I could still endanger him.”

“I don’t think you will,” Dean says kindly. “And I bet your brother would love to see you.” When Cas stares at the salt shaker in contemplation, Dean adds, “We don’t have to go in. We could just sit outside the house for a bit, see what feels right.” The corner of Cas’ mouth rises just a hair. Dean sees an opening and takes it. “Sweetheart, this is another way to take your life back. You’ve
been doing so well and... I just... I know you miss him. And I bet you guys were a force to be reckoned with when you were together, huh?” Cas closes his eyes as his mouth curls into a half-smile, likely remembering all the times it was Cas and Gabe against the world and all the times they used “Poughkeepsie” to avoid the wrath of whatever adults were coming their way.

“I do miss him,” he admits.

Dean holds out his hand. “So let’s try.” Cas takes it and folds it between both of his, then leans his forehead on them.

“Okay.”

An hour later, they’re sitting in front of a gray Georgian Colonial.

“What do you think?” Dean asks in a whisper. Cas squeezes the hand he hasn’t let go of since they got back in the car. His body trembles and his grip tightens around Dean’s hand. Dean watches his lips thin into a line.

“Come with me?”

”Yeah, of course.”

Cas nods. “Let’s do it.”

Chapter End Notes

We have lots of stuff to look forward to next time. ;)

In case it was bugging you and you didn’t already look it up on Google, the line our lovesick Dean was thinking of came from the Disney movie Aladdin.
The October night is chilly, but Castiel feels hot and sticky. He never dreamed he’d be here ever again. Well, dreamed, yes. Actually believed, no. There’s a car in the driveway he doesn’t recognize, but that’s no big deal. People change cars all the time. Motion sensor lights flood the pathway and the portico as they step to the door. You aren’t safe, Castiel! You’re putting him in danger! He’s going to be pissed. He won’t believe you, anyway.

Those last words are hers, he knows, yet they still sting the most.

He has always loved you. But he might not anymore. Shut up.

Castiel rings the bell. He stares apprehensively at the door, wondering what his reunion with Gabriel will be like. Will they embrace? Will they stand there awkwardly? Will the door be slammed in his face? Will he yell “Cassie!” like he always did? He swallows the saliva pooling in his mouth as the door swings open. A woman stands there, phone in hand, with a dish towel draped over her arm.

“May I help you?” she asks. Castiel’s thudding heart splats to the unfamiliar welcome mat beneath his feet.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he manages to say. “I… I have the wrong house.”

The woman scrutinizes him. “Alright.”

“I… I’m sorry,” he repeats. He looks at Dean, who squeezes his hand.

“Who are you looking for?” she asks.

He turns back to the dark-haired woman and hesitates, wary of giving a stranger too much information. “My brother.”

“I see,” she says slowly. She keeps staring at him, squinting and tilting her head. “Does he live in this neighborhood? Maybe I know him.”

“He did. He lived here.”

Her face falls. “Oh. Well, I’ve been here over a year now.”

A year. Who knows where Gabriel is now? “Oh. Alright. Sorry to bother you.”

“No bother,” she says. She locks eyes with him. “Do I know you? Have I seen you around here?”

An inexplicable panic begins to build in his chest. He smiles his “everything is good” smile. “No, ma’am. I haven’t been here in a few years.”
“Oh. Well, good luck.” She pouts, unsatisfied, still appraising him as she begins to close the door. Castiel waves limply.

Dean squeezes his hand and tugs. “It’ll be alright, Cas,” he reassures him in that gentle, optimistic way he has.

The blue door with glass inlays stops in its trajectory and rapidly swings wide open again. “Cas? As in Castiel?” the woman asks with hope. When he nods, she exclaims, “That’s why I recognized you! Oh! Don’t leave, please!” She grabs his arm and drops her phone and towel in her haste. Castiel is baffled and a bit frightened by her behavior. He has no idea who this woman touching him is. “Gabe… he always hoped… oh my God!” The woman starts to cry. She’s still holding his arm. “Come in! I need to call Gabe!”

_Gabe? She knows him? “I… I wouldn’t feel right coming into your home. You don’t even know me.”_

“You’re Gabriel’s brother! You’re welcome here!” She picks up her phone and kicks the towel away, then tugs him inside. “Please sit! He’s traveling for business, but I’m going to call him right now!” Castiel watches as the woman opens her phone with shaking hands and scurries into the next room. He looks at Dean, whose eyebrows are raised.

“You okay?”

“Yes, I think so. I wish she wouldn’t just let people into her home. It’s not safe.”

Dean doesn’t have time to respond, because the woman walks back into the room and paces. “Answer your damn phone,” she mutters before Castiel hears his brother’s voice. His insides roll like he’s on the bumpy roads he and Gabe loved when they were kids. It’s not so pleasant now. “Gabe!” she cries at her phone. Her eyes glisten and dart around the screen. She must be on a video call.

“Kali! What’s wrong? Are you alright?”

“Castiel is here. He’s here, hon. In our house. Right now.”

Castiel counts five seconds of silence — the longest he thinks his brother has ever been silent — before he says in a tiny, shaking voice, “Put him on. Please.”

The woman — Kali, apparently — hands him her phone, and he sees Gabriel for the first time in years. “Cassie,” he croaks behind his hand. His eyes are shiny and serious, and he’s wearing a suit instead of his usual loud clothing, but it’s him. “Lemme get somewhere quiet. Don’t go, don’t go, okay?”

“I won’t go, Gabe,” he promises. Still, his brother doesn’t keep his eyes off the screen as he walks.

“Fuck,” his brother says breathlessly once he’s settled.

“Yes,” Castiel agrees.

“First of all, are you safe? Wait, no, first of all, I love you. Second of all, are you safe? And third, what the hell? Where’ve you been? We were worried sick!”

Castiel’s gut pulses in a strange mix of guilt and relief. “I’m sorry. First, I love you, too. Second, I’m safe. And third, I was in hell. I had to go. I’m so sorry.”
“It was her, wasn’t it? She was why you left?”

“Yes.”

“Did she hurt you?”

Castiel hangs his head. “Yes.”

“F***, Cassie.” Gabe rakes his hand through his chin-length hair. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“That’s a long story,” he sighs. “Short version is that I wasn’t sure you’d be safe if you knew.”

Gabriel scoffs. “What the hell could she do to us?”

Castiel huffs a short, dry laugh. “If you only knew.”

Gabriel pauses in thought. He grimaces, then says, “I’m sorry, Cassie. I’m sorry I didn’t know and I’m sorry I didn’t take more time to see you. When I tried calling…”

“Let me guess. I was ‘busy.’”

“Every time.” Gabriel huffs the same sort of laugh as his brother. “Guess you never got any of the messages.”

“Nope.”

“I knew that fucking bitch was playing us.” Next to him, Dean snorts and shakes his head in disgust, as he does every time she is mentioned. “Who’s the dude?” Gabe asks.

Castiel isn’t quite sure how to explain Dean. They are neighbors, but more than neighbors. Friends, but more than friends. Dating tonight, but who knows what Dean will want after this? Plus, he never came out to Gabe. He turns to Dean, who wears that warm mix of kindness and affection on his face that always draws Castiel in. He’s perfect, utterly perfect, and if there was ever someone to come out for, it’s him. He doesn’t linger on the significance of that for now. Castiel turns back to his brother and draws a breath. “This is Dean, my neighbor and my… my more,” he chuckles, “and he is on the weirdest first date of his life right now.” Dean, with all his spirit and fire, burns the heaviness out of the room with a gorgeous flare of laughter. He loves that laugh.

“I see,” Gabe says with a smile. “Nice to meet you, Dean. Clearly my baby bro is taken with you.”

“I’m taken with him,” Dean responds to Gabe as he gazes at Castiel. Dean’s attentions are singular like that, and Castiel understands why people (and planets, perhaps) revolve around him.

“Aww, Cassie,” his brother teases.

“Hush, Gabby,” Castiel turns and responds in a very brotherly, automatic way with the feminized nickname his brother hates.

“Sh*t, I hate that and I still missed it,” Gabriel says, voice watery and pained. Castiel feels horrible. He never realized how much his absence hurt his brother. “Can we talk alone for a few minutes?”

“Oh of course.” Dean and Kali leave the room, both with an affectionate squeeze of his arm, and Castiel settles back into the familiar couch. “I’m sorry, Gabe,” he says once again. Gabriel waves his apology off.

“Where are you living now?”
“Maine.”

“Maine,” he repeats and nods. “Have you been in touch with Dad and Mom?”

“No. Not, uh… not yet.”

“Yeah. Okay.” He sighs shakily. “Cassie, I… I never thought this day would come.” His strong, rarely serious brother breaks down and sobs. Castiel’s throat tightens. “I always hoped, but honestly there was a part of me that thought maybe she killed you and left you somewhere.”

“I’m so sorry to cause you all this pain,” Castiel rasps. “Honestly, though, I think that could’ve happened if I’d stayed.” Castiel grips Kali’s phone hard in his sweating palm.

“Shit. It was that bad.” They sit in silence for a while. Castiel knows this must be overwhelming for Gabe. It certainly is for him. “What… what did she do?”

“It’s not something I want to get into tonight. But I want to tell you.”

“Okay. Fuck, I missed you, Cassie.”

“I missed you too, Gabe. Every day.”

They talk for a while longer before the emotional fatigue gets to them both. They exchange numbers, Gabriel testing the number Castiel gives him during their video call to make sure he isn’t giving him something fake, which hurts but Castiel understands. He was gone without a trace for over a year of his own volition, and Gabe doesn’t want to lose him again. They hang up with promises to talk soon. When he meets up with Dean and Kali in the kitchen, he sees that she broke out framed pictures of him — that must’ve been how she recognized him — and albums that he’s certain have embarrassing photos in them. He smiles at the woman he learned is his brother’s fiancée (he’d finally met his match, he said of her) and thanks her as he hands her phone back to her. She throws herself at him in a joyful hug. Castiel hardly flinches when she wraps her arms around his neck. She kisses him hard on the cheek. “Thank you,” she says. “Thank you for coming home to your brother. He will finally be whole again.” Castiel feels some of his holes filling in, too.

The ride to the hotel in Vernon is quiet, Dean giving him ample space to think and just be. The day sits in his muscles and makes them ache in the most interesting of ways. He thinks his heart aches the most — it has been used the most today, after all. It isn’t the ache of pain, though. It’s the ache of work, work that feels good and is leading toward a higher purpose, toward a real life and not just an existence he tells himself is a life. He glances at Dean when they arrive — perfect Dean, with his perfect face and perfect body and perfect mind and perfect spirit — and smiles. He’s made his heart ache in the best way, working it beyond what Castiel thought he’d be capable of ever again.

“How are you doing?” Dean asks, with perfect thoughtfulness.

“I was just thinking about our date,” Castiel says in answer, though it doesn’t really answer the question. He takes Dean’s hand. “What is your position on kissing at the end of a first date?”

If such a thing were possible, he’d swear Dean swallows his tongue in surprise. He clears his throat and puts on a stern, thoughtful expression. He’s trying for deadpan, Castiel knows, but it’s not working because his goodness and hopefulness make him glow like a thousand paper lanterns, even in the blue-white of the parking lot floodlights shining through the windshield.

“Well, um, I think that I am, in general, pro-kiss, if the date went well and everyone wants to, and, you know.” Castiel can tell he’s blushing — not by the color of his skin, which he can’t see
distinctly, but by the way he bites his lip and the way his eyes crinkle in the corners and the way he rubs his neck.

“Alright. So, do you think the date went well? I know it was, uh... unusual would be the generous term, maybe.”

Dean plays with the fingers that Castiel weaved into his. “It was like a book, Cas,” he answers. “There was action and adventure, a bunch of emotions, a happy reunion, and a couple of awesome main characters you couldn’t help but root for. And I never wanted it to end.” Dean flicks his eyes to Castiel, who can only nod. He swallows hard.

“And... do you want to kiss me?”

“Only every day,” he says with that endearing grin that softens as he keeps Cas’ eyes held in his. “And you? Do you think the date went well? Do you want to kiss me?”

You’re safe. You’re okay. Most people are good. He is good. “Yes.”

“Yes to...?”

No, Castiel! What if? What if?

Yes, Castiel. What if?

“Everything,” Castiel says. He traces Dean’s stubble along his jaw. “May I?”

Dean nods, so he presses his lips against Dean’s hesitantly, waiting for some alarm to sound off in his brain, but it doesn’t come. Castiel realizes that maybe, for once, it won’t. Maybe, for once, she hasn’t ruined something for him. Maybe, just this once, he can feel again. You are alive. He surges into the sun.

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Dean wasn’t kidding when he told Cas his opinion about their date. It was easily the most unusual and best date he’s ever had. Being outdoors (even if it was running), riding in Baby, talking about both serious and nonsense stuff, it was all awesome. The car museum… man, Cas really would’ve won him over with that if he wasn’t already won over. And dinner… he was so happy to be able to take Cas out, to treat him to something he’d love and show him off to the world. It got heavy, but Cas placed his faith in Dean. He felt it and it felt incredible, because he knew it was a faith he didn’t give easily.

Seeing Cas reunite with his brother brought tears to his eyes. He kept it together for Cas’ sake until he was alone with Kali, when both of them wept for a good five minutes. She asked him what happened and he said he couldn’t tell her, but she threw out some guesses and they were pretty close (in the broadest sense, anyway). She told him that they had marched to New York the minute The Bitch (Kali’s name for her — he knew he liked this woman) called Gabe, demanding to know if Cas was with them. Gabe knew there was something amiss. It wasn’t like Cas to just disappear. Talking to her had made them suspicious, and seeing their home more suspicious still (she wouldn’t elaborate on that one). But they couldn’t pin anything on her. Gabe had done a lot of calling around, even set up internet searches and hired a private investigator, but nothing came up. “Gabe always stayed hopeful,” she told Dean. “But there were times… he couldn’t always keep the fear from his mind.” Dean knew that Cas was all too familiar with that feeling.

Kali showed him a bunch of pictures of Cas from when he was younger. They all stopped around the time Cas got married. Cas was an adorable kid; he looked curious and lively and spunky. When
Cas joined them in the kitchen, his eyes looked a shade bluer, his skin a shade brighter. He let Kali hug him around the neck. He smiled his real smile, not his fake it smile. He looked at Dean with a serenity that made Dean want to weep (again) and drop to his knees in praise and gratitude.

He didn’t think the day could be any more perfect.

But now, there’s a chorus singing “Ode to Joy” triumphantly in Dean’s head because Cas is kissing him and fuck it’s amazing.

It started slow and shy. Dean let him set the pace, following him cautiously just in case he wanted to stop. But now Cas has opened his lips and oh God that’s his tongue and Dean’s head is spinning. He follows, introducing his tongue into Cas’ mouth and shivering at the moan that vibrates between them like an echo. Cas clutches his jacket with one hand and runs his fingers through his hair with the other as he practically pours himself into Dean’s mouth (and Dean is a very willing vessel). Dean copies his movements, though he is gentler than Cas, cautious of ruining this for him by being too rough. He loves the feel of Cas under his palms and loves being in Cas’ warm, firm grip. Another moan escapes one of them, maybe both, and Cas moves the jacket hand to Dean’s face, spreading his fingers along his cheek and jaw. His fingers tighten, turning white; a delicious tingle zings through Dean’s body at the intensity of Cas’ desire. Cas tugs him closer even though there’s no space between their mouths, and Dean groans with it, inhaling sharply at the pull of his hair. At that, Cas breaks the kiss suddenly, removing his hands. They’re only a few inches away but it might as well be miles for how it feels to Dean.

“I’m sorry,” he says, swollen lips quivering and haunted eyes darting between Dean’s eyes.

“What the hell for?” Dean asks, bewildered. He hopes it doesn’t sound harsh, because he doesn’t mean it to be, but he can’t for the life of him imagine what he could be sorry for.

“I got aggressive. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“What? You didn’t get aggressive, and you didn’t hurt me.”

“I gripped you too tightly and it hurt you. Your hair. I hurt you.” He begins to turn away, but Dean stops him. Gently, he holds two fingers to his jaw until Cas turns his head back and their eyes meet. They stay there a moment, suspended, as Dean thinks. He doesn’t want to say the wrong thing, but how does he tell Cas, a man who’s been abused in countless ways, that he likes his partner a little… assertive, every so often? A little wild with desire? Maybe it would feel like Cas has the power, which would help, but maybe it would feel like they’ve reversed roles and he’s the abuser. Cas, his love, who would never hurt anyone or anything, would be sickened by the thought.

“I promise you didn’t hurt me,” Dean says finally, not knowing what else to say. “Everything was perfect, sweetheart.” Cas looks at him doubtfully, but nods eventually. The heat escaping the car and the cool temperatures outside have Dean reaching for Cas’ hands. “Your fingertips are getting a little chilly,” Dean notes with a smile. “Wanna go in?”

They head inside and to their room, which is in desperate need of a facelift but it’ll do for the night. He lets Cas use the bathroom first, and he texts Jess while Cas showers.

From Dean 9:47pm: So Cas and I kissed and I’m not sure if he’s freaked out or not

From Jess 9:49pm: Yay! I’m so happy for you! Are you happy? Does he look freaked out?

From Dean 9:50pm: Hell yeah I’m happy. :) No, he seems okay. He got a little worried he hurt me but he didn’t. I don’t know how to make him believe me. And I REALLY want to kiss him
goodnight. Should I?

From Jess 9:51pm: Don’t ask me. Ask him, duh.

From Jess 9:51pm: And you can’t MAKE him believe you. Just keep reassuring him. What did he do?

From Dean 9:52pm: Just pulled my hair, that’s all.

From Jess 9:52pm: Maybe it’s a trigger? Or maybe he’s not ready to do that yet?

From Dean 9:53pm: I don’t know. But it was fine with me.

From Jess 9:53pm: So tell him that.

From Dean 9:54pm: I did. I just want to make sure he understands.

From Jess 9:55pm: All you can do is tell him and stay consistent. Be truthful. Listen to his concerns. Maybe slow down a little.

From Dean 9:55pm: Alright.

From Jess 9:55pm: Talk to him.

So Dean does, once he’s taken his own shower and is back in the room. Cas is on his bed, resting against the headboard with his legs folded. He’s typing something on his phone. “Gabriel,” Cas explains, gesturing to his screen, which is littered with blue and gray talk bubbles. Dean smiles and takes a similar position as Cas on his own bed.

“Can we talk?” he asks when Cas finishes. He nods and waits, looking nervous. “I just wanted to check in, see how you are after…” he can’t finish, because despite the potential touchiness of the topic, the kiss still sets off fireworks in his chest. He rubs at his face, embarrassment burning under his skin and blooming on his cheeks. “Ugh, I’m pathetic,” he moans. He looks up and sees Cas smiling at him fondly.

“You’re cute when you blush,” he says, which only makes Dean blush that much brighter. He’s surprised when Cas adds, “May I sit with you?” Dean nods vigorously, and Cas steps over and sits at the foot of Dean’s worn bed. It creaks when Dean crawls down to join him. Dean notices a slight rosiness to Cas’ face and feels a little better. “I’m sorry,” he starts.

“For what? I told you I liked it. It didn’t hurt.”

Cas brows and mouth perk up subtly. “You didn’t tell me you liked it.” He chuckles and rubs Dean’s hand in his own when Dean drops his head and pinches between his brows, embarrassed yet again. “I mean I’m sorry for overreacting. According to you, it didn’t hurt, and I know in my rational brain that it probably surprised you more than anything. I’m just very… aware of those sorts of things, as you might imagine.”

“I know you are, and you’re right. It wasn’t rough or anything. It surprised me because I didn’t expect it and I… liked it, as I said.” He wipes the sweat from his free hand onto his thigh. “It felt like you wanted me, like you were into it.”

“I did want you, and I was into it,” Cas admits. “It’s been a long time, and I like you so much, and apparently it’s one of the few things she hasn’t tainted for me and… it felt good to feel good, to desire someone and to be desired in return. It has been a very long time since I felt that from
someone so strongly and… with certainty, I guess. I never doubted you.”

“Yeah, I’m definitely a sure thing, Cas,” Dean laughs. Cas laughs with him, then sighs.

“In terms of going further, though, I can’t… um, I won’t be able to…”

“Cas, let’s take it one step at a time, okay? See what feels right. Like… a second date, maybe?” He grins impishly, and Cas bites the corner of his lip and smiles before nodding. Dean dances in place, making the bed bounce a little as he wiggles and making Cas smile so widely that Dean’s giddy with it.

Dean flips the TV on and settles on some singing competition show, neither quite ready for sleep despite the long, emotional day. He moves back to the top of his bed and throws all the pillows onto the floor, then invites Cas to sit with him with an outstretched hand. “Up to you, sweetheart,” he says. Cas stands, fixes the t-shirt Dean insisted on buying for him at the car museum (which he has tucked into his pajama pants), then sits and snuggles next to Dean, who sighs happily into it.

“So, you doing okay after everything today?” Dean asks.

“Yes.” He leans on Dean’s shoulder and says, “That outfit is terrible.”

Dean snickers as he focuses on the TV. He feels at peace here, in a two-star hotel room in Vernon, Connecticut. “Damn, that’s ugly,” he says in agreement. Cas takes his hands in his and turns his face up toward him, and when Dean looks back and asks permission, they kiss softly until the singer with the terrible outfit finishes his equally terrible song.

Chapter End Notes

Ahh, the first kiss! <3 And many of you were very excited about Gabe joining the story. Rest assured that there will be more of Gabe to come.

Next time: Date two and some drama... see you Friday <3
The soft *ping* of his phone draws him out of a deep sleep and a very pleasant dream.

*From Gabe 6:45am: Morning baby bro*

He picks up his phone and responds:

*From Castiel 6:46am: Good morning much much older than me bro*

*From Gabe 6:46am: Fuck you. Damn I missed you.)*

*From Castiel 6:47am: Missed you too Gabe*

They talk for a few minutes until Dean starts stirring, then Castiel sends him a final text to let him know he’ll talk to him later. He watches Dean wake up slowly, looking for a pillow that isn’t there. Since he found out about Castiel’s little pillow aversion, he stopped using them. Once he gets used to having Dean around in this way, he’ll have to reintroduce the pillows. He actually does like them and sleeps with them at home when he’s alone. *You won’t be sleeping with him, Castiel.* Oh yeah. He forgot. What a blessed, glorious freedom he had for just a moment there.

“Mornin’, Cas,” Dean smiles drowsily as he stretches. Castiel’s eyes roam over the contours of Dean’s arms, shoulders, and chest. They’re impressive even in the shadows of the gray room. “Damn, we slept in.”

“So we did,” Castiel notes with a pleasantly surprised hum. It’s not something he’d ever thought would happen for him with another person in the room. Of course, he’d never expected to share a room ever again. He smiles at Dean, then surreptitiously checks his t-shirt under the covers to make sure it’s still pinned and heads to the bathroom, taking his bag with him. He scrutinizes himself in front of the mirror as he undresses. He’s still young, relatively speaking. He’s healthy. His muscles ripple impressively when he flexes. *But you’re still a broken toy. An ugly, broken toy. He just hasn’t seen the cracks yet.* He ruffles his hair and stares at his tight body before he slips on his shirt and carefully tucks the extra-long shirttail into his jeans. He likes the cooler months when he can wear clothes that look more fitted. He can’t really tuck in his shirts in the summer. It gets too hot.

“So, I think we’ll make it home today,” Dean says as they pack, sounding very much like he’d rather not. Castiel understands the feeling. Despite his fears, this week has been one of the best weeks he’s ever had. Dean has proven himself trustworthy again and again, a pure, bright soul. That’s why he won’t expose him to his ugliest parts. He’s ashamed enough that Dean knows he couldn’t protect his own pet, and that he stayed much too long in an abusive relationship. If he knew the other stuff… Well, he won’t. Castiel nods at Dean’s comment. He continues, “So I was thinking… we could do another road date? We have plenty of time.”
Castiel loves the idea. He wants to stretch out this thing between them as long as possible. “I’d like that,” he says, and means it.

They stop at Rein’s Deli for breakfast, then jump onto I-84 to start the trek home.

“The trees got a lot of color right now,” Dean notes as they pass mile after mile of colorful oaks interspersed with evergreens.

“They do,” Castiel agrees. He glances at Dean, and already he wants to kiss him again. He fears it could quickly become a habit, which doesn’t bode well for him when Dean eventually decides to break it off. Or when Castiel has to. “Do you think we could take the back roads instead? I know it would add to the time a bit, but I think Baby would enjoy it.” And I would, too.

“Yeah, definitely! This girl is made for the back roads. Love the way you think, Cas.” His eyes glitter in the morning sun and Castiel finds himself entranced and floaty. When Dean offers his hand, he takes it and holds on as if Dean is his only tether to Earth.

Once they leave the highway, many of the roads in Connecticut are the kind of roads Castiel imagined Dean traveling with his beloved car — long, winding, and open, with not much around. They take turns telling each other stories about growing up, stories about their siblings, stories about jobs and school and whatever else comes to mind. It’s so easy talking to Dean. He’s going to miss the hell out of him, out of being this close. He wants to kiss him again.

They stop at a place called Life Alive in Lowell, Massachusetts that Dean finds on his phone when they stop for gasoline. It’s an adorable café with bright, funky walls and chairs and cute (if not all that well-crafted) tables.

“Interesting names for their dishes,” Dean comments.

“Indeed,” he replies. “I think I’ll get The Innocent, or maybe The Rebel. Although The Lover sounds good, too.” He reads the description. “‘Juicy, messy, and fantastic because of it.’ Hmm.” He turns to Dean, who’s eyeing him with a familiar flare behind those leafy green eyes. Upon being caught, he quickly darts his eyes back to the menu. Castiel’s mouth turns up in a smirk he hasn’t used in a while. In the past, when seeing that sort of heat, he flirted mercilessly. He leans slightly closer. “What’ll it be for you? The Emperor? The Romantic?” he asks, pitching his voice low. A thrill shivers through his entire being. This is… fun.

“You’re being a dick,” Dean mutters. Surprised, Castiel laughs loudly and steps forward to order, leaving Dean at his back. He takes a deep breath and doesn’t correct himself, but does peek back at Dean, who’s smiling and watching him with something that makes his stomach feel like it’s filled with hummingbirds. He turns back and orders The Innocent. Dean steps forward and orders a demi portion of The Sufi Poet along with The Healer bowl. The Healer. Fitting, Castiel thinks.

Lunch is delightful, both because of the food and the company. The pink never quite leaves Dean’s cheeks, nor does the smile. Castiel knows he looks the same. Dean’s foot brushes his one too many times to be an accident, so he loops his leg around Dean’s and holds them together. If they were having some sort of “goofiest smile” contest, he’s not sure who would win.

Taking smoothies to go (Love Alive for Castiel, Ecstatic for Dean, which he could barely order, especially after Castiel noticed him lingering on Lust Alive and commented on it), they hop back in the car, Castiel behind the wheel this time. They drive through some more populated areas of Massachusetts before returning to remote roads in New Hampshire. Castiel still wants to kiss him, the urge even greater now. And well, they are on a date… “Want to play a game?”
“Sure.”

“Alright.” He pulls over onto a sandy shoulder, then takes his phone and brings up his music. “This is something I used to play on road trips with friends. We pick three songs that mean something to us, or just three songs we like or whatever. We put the playlist on shuffle, and when one of them plays, we have to pull over, get out of the car, and dance.”

Dean laughs. “Alright.”

“You can pick.”

“Nah. Driver picks the music. Those are the rules.”

“We’ll choose together, how’s that?” Dean nods, and they easily agree on the three recent additions to his library that Castiel hoped they would.

“I hope it doesn’t take too long. This is like waiting for a Jack-in-the-box to pop,” Dean says several minutes later, shifting in his seat. He wiggles like a kid when he’s excited, and it’s one of the cutest things Castiel’s ever seen. Castiel chuckles and agrees. He doesn’t want to wait too long, either.

“Yes!” Dean shouts after another three songs. He pauses the music. “Alright, out!”

They pull over in a quiet spot near Kingston and tumble out. Dean restarts “Cha Cha Slide” and the two mature, adult men stomp, clap, criss cross, and Reverse, reverse! until the song ends, at which point they laugh uncontrollably as they collapse against the car. “Ah, shit, that was awesome!”

Dean says breathlessly. Castiel glances at Dean, bright and happy. Yes, it really was awesome.

In Epping, they have to stop at a Lowe’s parking lot and dance to “I’m Still Standing,” much to the embarrassment of both of them (“but rules are rules,” Dean reminds them both with a grin). They get a few stares, but when Dean is being so adorably goofy and carefree, Castiel can’t be bothered to care.

It takes a long time to get to the last one, but Castiel is pleased when they’re in a remote spot somewhere in Lebanon, Maine when it finally comes on. He pulls over and looks at Dean, who’s smiling softly and chewing at his lip. “May I have this dance?” Castiel asks nervously.

“Yeah,” Dean says. He lays the phone on the hood and starts the song over, then they loop an arm around each other. Dean is careful to keep his hand toward the middle of his back, Castiel notices. He’s so grateful for this man’s thoughtfulness. Dean offers him a hand, and they sway with a little bounce to the upbeat piano. When the tempo picks up, Castiel surprises Dean by twirling him, then sweeping him around in a large circle. Dean’s gorgeous greens flare with mirth. He closes his eyes when Dean pulls him closer as the song slows, their hands tucked between them and their heads touching. Castiel opens his eyes when the tempo picks up again; he separates a little from Dean, only so that he can spin around with him once more and undulate his hips to the beat like an old girlfriend taught him. He’s surprised by Dean returning the favor, twirling him under his arm and flinging him out the length of their arms, only to have their linked hands pull them toward each other again. By the time Dean sings “You’re such a heavenly view,” they’re breathless and glowing with exertion and the blush of something new and significant. Castiel sings it back to him, and they laugh because they can’t help it. He cradles Dean’s face in his roughened hands. “May I?”

“Please,” Dean answers.
Castiel captures Dean’s lips with his as the song fades out, and he doesn’t stop even as the next song begins. It’s a much slower song, and the men find themselves rocking gently as their lips meet again and again.

“Maybe this should be our song instead. Our song is a lot harder to dance to,” Dean jokes when they stop for air.

“I like it, but I like ours better, despite its challenges. It has more meaning attached to it.” He rolls his eyes internally at himself. What a ridiculously sappy comment. Dean grins softly and kisses him again, making Castiel feel drunk.

“True. And I do like a challenge. But now this one will have meaning, too,” Dean points out. He nuzzles Castiel’s nose. “Come away with me and we’ll kiss,” he croons along with Norah Jones.

The hummingbirds from earlier fly into Castiel’s throat, nearly choking him with sweet emotion. His lips seek out Dean’s nectar, drawing it into himself. Dean moans softly and Castiel swallows that, too. “God, Cas,” he murmurs. Castiel knows just what he means.

***

If Dean’s emotions were blended into a smoothie, it would be full of unusual ingredients that taste incredibly perfect together. It would be the kind of smoothie you’d want to drink again and again, the kind you wouldn’t mind standing in line for or getting up extra early to make. His smoothie has anticipation, and cautiousness, and sensitivity and restraint. It has concern and anxiety and righteous anger. And it has elation, and pride, and giddiness and lightheartedness and joy and love. Pulling into Cas’ driveway, he glances at him in the passenger seat and hears the blender working in his mind.

“Hey Cas?”

“Hmm?”

“I was thinkin’ about, maybe for our third date, if you’re willing, um… how about that progressive dinner thing? We could invite Sam and Jess, and Benny and Andrea, and Donna, and Charlie.”

The smoothie froths on high power as Cas answers, “That sounds… that sounds fun, actually. I think I could manage that now.”

“Awesome,” Dean smiles. “Um, next weekend, if everyone’s available?”

“Sure.”

“Kay. Um…” Dean inhales deeply as the blender blade chops up his anxiety, sending chunks whirling. “So, are we, I mean, would you consider us, if you were asked, would you call us, um, boyfriends?”

Dean watches Cas glance at him before sighing and staring at his lap. “I still would not make a good boyfriend, Dean.”

“I still disagree.”

“Of course you do.” He rolls his head up to look at Dean. The corner of his mouth is ticked up and his eyes are clear and unguarded.

“I do.” Feeling brave, he presses, “I know it’s hard to move on. I mean I don’t, really, I can’t
imagine, actually. But I really want to be with you, and you can trust me, I swear.”

His dusky eyes cloud over, giving them the look of rain. “You would probably regret it.”

“I got lots of stuff I regret. Like that time in Savannah I told you about? That one for sure. But I would never regret one minute with you, Cas.”

Cas huffs. “You don’t know everything about me.”

“Hey, you told me you could be an axe murderer and I didn’t run.” At Cas’ rueful smile and shake of his head, Dean laughs and takes his hand. He’s getting through, he hopes. “We can take it at your pace—”

“Yes, that’s the problem. For you. I can’t commit to you because my pace will slow down to a stop, Dean. That’s not fair to you. Eventually I’ll have to stop because….” He lets the sentence hang and rests his eyes on his lap again, fiddling with his hands.

“Because…?” Dean prompts. He glides his fingers through Cas’ dark waves. He’s in need of a haircut, though he looks just as hot with it longer.

“Because,” Cas mutters, closing his eyes against some sort of pain, Dean believes. The anger at that terrible woman rears itself again. He chokes it down and wills his voice to stay composed even though he feels Cas slipping through his fingers. He grasps for something, anything in the thoughts spinning in his brain that would make Cas pause.

“What about just for today?” Dean asks desperately. Cas turns to him, brow arched. Ah. An opening.

“I mean, we’ve been doing well, right, taking it one day at a time?” Cas nods. “Okay, so if having a boyfriend without a time limit is too much, what about having one just for the next twenty-four hours?” Cas looks at him as if he’s lost his mind, which only strengthens Dean’s resolve, because at least Cas is thinking about it. “So every morning or whatever, we’ll decide whether we’re boyfriends that day. Take it as it comes, you know? And if we are boyfriends that day, we decide whatever that means for us that day. It doesn’t mean that you have to kiss me, or do anything you aren’t comfortable doing, and neither do I. But if you decide that maybe you want to kiss, or go on a date, or… whatever, anything, we can, as long as we both agree.”

“That is… sweet of you to offer, but it’s unnecessarily complicated and completely unfair to you. You deserve to be with someone you don’t have to make these weird concessions for.”

“Unngghh,” Dean groans, throwing his head back on the seat. “I’m trying to find a way to make this work because I want to be with you. What is so hard to understand about that? Did she make you think you’re not worthy of being happy and cared for?”

“Yes, she did,” Cas says blankly.

The horror of that flat statement is almost too much to bear, but he presses on. “So let me convince you otherwise. Let me show you that you’re worthy of being happy and loved. She is not the voice you should have in your head, sweetheart. You need your voice. You deserve happiness. You’re a good person.”

“Yes, she did,” Cas says blankly.

The horror of that flat statement is almost too much to bear, but he presses on. “So let me convince you otherwise. Let me show you that you’re worthy of being happy and loved. She is not the voice you should have in your head, sweetheart. You need your voice. You deserve happiness. You’re a good person.”

“Dean, you don’t want me. I am so fucked up—”

“See, that shit, what you’re doing right now, is frustrating. We’re all fucked up somehow, Cas! Life is about one fucked up person finding another fucked up person so they can be happily fucked up together. You are the fucked up guy I want in my fucked up life, so stop trying to take the choice away from me. Don’t tell me how I feel. If you don’t want to be with me, fine, but don’t tell
me I shouldn’t want what I want!”

The haze of frustration subsides enough for Dean to see Cas’ stunned face clearly. He exhales shakily. “Cas, I’m…”

Cas puts up a hand to stop him. “I’m going to think about what you said. Would you open the trunk for me, please?”

Dean closes his eyes and nods, swallowing thickly. He manages to keep the tears at bay as he pulls Cas’ suitcase from the trunk, then the mirror and other odds and ends they picked up along the way. He silently helps Cas bring everything inside, then hovers at the door and tries to apologize again. “Cas, I really am…”

“You’ve given me a lot to think about, and I need some time and space to sort out my thoughts.”

“But I—”

Cas stops him with his hand again, this time laid gently on his shoulder. “Dean. I need to think. Thank you for everything.” He kneads his shoulder once before withdrawing and closing the door gently.

Dean only makes it halfway down the path before the tears spring free from his eyes. They don’t stop even when he arrives at his brother’s and takes his own suitcase out, leaving the other items in his trunk for now.

“Hey!” Jess and Sam greet him simultaneously.

“Hey,” he grunts, trudging to his room and slamming the door shut. He’s so angry at himself. Why did you have to open your stupid mouth? You should’ve dealt with all your shitty feelings first, not vomited them all over him!

Jess knocks. He knows it’s her by her assertive knock that tells him she’s coming in whether he likes it or not. Sure enough, she opens the door before he has a chance to say anything.

“I expected a lovesick puppy to come running through the door. Something happen with you and Cas?”

“I screwed up so bad, Jess.” He tells the story; she sits thoughtfully when he finishes.

“Maybe, maybe not,” she says.

“I don’t think there’s a maybe about it.”

“Well, you probably could’ve been more delicate,” she admits. “And maybe you mentioned the boyfriend thing too quickly. But you get to want things and have feelings too, you know. You’re not a robot. I know you’ve been working really hard at being everything he needs, but no one can be everything that someone needs. Besides, if you guys are going to have a relationship, he has to acknowledge your feelings, too.”

“I know, I know, but he does. He’s great, he always listens…”

“But have you ever shared your feelings about this? I mean, I know it’s hard, I do, and I know you’re trying to be sensitive to his needs, which I’m sure he appreciates. But there are going to be times when you guys fight, when something he does drives you crazy and vice versa. That’s when you lean on the strength of your relationship to get you through. I mean, you can’t be completely
understanding 24/7. You’re gonna have a bad day, you’re gonna have your own wants and needs, and maybe you shouldn’t dump them on him but you should tell him in a constructive way how it feels to you when he puts himself down or says what he thinks is best for you.”

“I guess.”

“And he didn’t yell at you, right? He just needs to think. That’s okay, right? I mean, he seems like the kind of guy who needs that, anyway.”

“I guess.”

“Hey.” She waits until Dean, who’s been tugging at a thread on the blanket, meets her gaze. “I know you like him—”

“I love him, Jess.”

“Oh!” she utters, sitting back. “Oh, Dean. No wonder you’re so worried.”

“I really am.” He buries his crumbling face into his hands.

“Oh, sweetie,” she murmurs, rubbing his too-warm back. She gives him a moment, then says, “You know, you tell Cas he can trust you. Maybe you need to trust him, too.”

He deflates under her palm. He’d never thought of that. Maybe they both have things to work on. He nods. She kisses him on the top of his head and leaves him to his thoughts.

It’s a long, restless night, and in the morning he glances at his unshaved face and his hooded eyes and grunts at his reflection. He was so happy just twenty-four hours ago. Not bothering to brush his teeth, he shuffles into the kitchen, only to hear his brother and sister-in-law talking with someone in the living room. His heart leaps in recognition as he forgoes breakfast in favor of what he really desires.

“Hello, Dean,” Cas greets him as he peeks in. He looks as handsome as he always does. Even the red rims of his eyes don’t detract from his attractiveness; the red makes the blue stand out even more, only deepening and sharpening the irises he can’t get enough of. He’s wearing a large, ratty sweatshirt, navy blue nylon running pants, and his red and black sneakers. It’s not fair that a sleep-deprived, running-clothed man in need of a shave and haircut can look so damn hot. Maybe it’s the smile. Maybe it’s... the smile. He’s smiling.

“Hey Cas,” Dean croaks, then swallows the lump that’s been there since last night. “Hey,” he says again.

“Would you like to go running?” he asks.

It’s not what he expected, but he jumps at the chance. He figures maybe Cas wants to talk, but they say nothing as they trample through the neighborhood, passing bare and partially-bare trees, houses that are dressed up for Halloween, and a fellow runner. He’s not sure what’s happening between them, but there’s a meditateness to running that Cas has taught him to tap into; he sinks into it, settling his anxiety with every step as he matches Cas’ slower (for Dean’s benefit, he knows) rhythm. As they reach Sam and Jess’, Cas stops Dean with a hand to his arm.

“You really want me to be your boyfriend?” he asks. There’s doubt, but also hopefulness in his eyes.

“Yes, I really do,” Dean replies, with no doubt and twice the hopefulness.
Cas breathes in the October chill, then expels the vapor in a short puff. “I really want to kiss you right now, boyfriend,” he says shyly.

Dean laughs joyfully and opens his arms, releasing a surprised grunt as Cas throws himself into him and kisses the hell out of him right there on the street in the early Saturday quiet.

“How about a smoothie and some tofu scramble, boyfriend?” Dean asks breathlessly, nuzzling Cas’ cheek.

“Sounds good,” Cas replies, turning his head to capture his lips again.

It’s the second-sweetest smoothie Dean’s ever had.

Chapter End Notes

The songs they dance to are:
“Cha Cha Slide” by DJ Casper
“I’m Still Standing” by Elton John
“Sky Full Of Stars” by Coldplay
“Come Away With Me” by Norah Jones

Next time: More Cas/Gabe interaction, mature relationship conversation, and a third date <3
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

There is a brief warning for mentions of physical violence (see end notes for details if needed).

Enjoy boys who actually talk about their relationship. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He’s waiting for the question, and he thinks he’s prepared to answer it. Maybe.

When Castiel told Dean yesterday that he had to think, it wasn’t a way to blow him off. He really did need to think about everything Dean said, because it was the first time Dean had expressed anything other than supportiveness and understanding and blah, blah, blah. He was frustrated. At Castiel. And Castiel needed to figure out what all that meant.

After the debacle with his mother, he told Dean that he wanted to have a relationship with him, and that meant he needed to share himself and be honest with him. He told him that he could hurt him way more than April, because he’d be vulnerable. He’s not sure if Dean really understood what he was saying then. He didn’t mean physical vulnerability, or even emotional or mental vulnerability, though of course those were all possible, too. What Castiel meant was spiritual vulnerability. Though he was afraid, he knew even then that he wanted a deeper connection with him, a connection he’d never given a lover, knowing it meant that Dean could inflict a deep soul-hurt that would devastate him.

Dean swore he wouldn’t hurt him.

But Castiel felt hurt.

What he needed to sort out was why he felt hurt.

He made some dinner and thought about it. He unpacked and did laundry and thought about it. He planned out his projects for the week and didn’t think about it much, wanting to focus on the tasks at hand instead and needing a mental break from it. He soaked in a too-short bathtub (thanking God that he’s starting the bathroom reno on Monday) and thought about it. He thought about the paths his mind was wandering, both old and new, and how the new paths were starting to feel stronger and the old paths were starting to grow over, though he found himself wandering down them still when he felt too vulnerable or scared. He wished he could sort this out with Mia, but it’s the weekend and he wouldn’t do that to her. After a long soak, he came to some conclusions. But first, he wanted to check out his conclusions with someone, knowing with his history that he could get caught up in some thought patterns that didn’t serve him well. He threw on a t-shirt and sweatpants and, with pruny fingers, he dialed his brother for a FaceTime chat.

“Cassie!”

“Hey Gabe. How are you?”

“Spec-fucking-tacular!” he said with his usual enthusiasm that Castiel had missed so much. “Have
you thought any more about Thanksgiving?” Gabe had been texting Castiel at every opportunity he had in the last twenty-four hours, and had already asked him about coming for Thanksgiving.

“I have. I’m just not sure I’m ready to meet Kali’s family. I don’t really want to have an emotional breakdown in front of them, especially if things don’t go well.”

“Not a problem, ’cause change of plans, we’re having them over that weekend instead, so bingo bango, it’ll just be us and Mom and Dad along with you and Deano. So! Better, right? Have you called them yet?”

“I haven’t, no, and I haven’t talked to Dean about it yet, either. We just got home and I have another matter I need to deal with first. Actually, that’s why I called.”

“Alrighty, what’s up?”

Castiel sighed and ran his hand through his wet hair. “I need to think this through out loud and see if I’m on the right track.”

Gabriel gave him a worried look — they’d never been the type to “talk” unless something was very serious. “Alright, shoot.”

Castiel explained their discussion about becoming boyfriends, then said, “So what I’m thinking is that this is a good thing for us. He was finally able to be completely honest with me. I mean, I do believe he’s always been honest, but this time it felt like we were getting to another level of honesty, a level of ‘I don’t need to pretend because I know our relationship can withstand it’ type of honesty. Does that make sense?”

“Sure it does,” he said with a thoughtful nod. “But I don’t really get why this is a huge thing. I guess if I were you I’d want to date again ASAP and get the taste of The Bitch out of my mouth.”

“It’s complicated,” Castiel said, rubbing his face.

“Why is it complicated? She was a bitch, you left, you move on and get some happiness for yourself after a horrible relationship. Sounds simple.”

“You’d think,” he huffed. He plopped onto his bed with a *thwump* after spending the entire conversation pacing. “There’s just a lot to it that you don’t know.”

“So tell me.”

“I don’t really want to do this over the phone.”

“Cassie, come on. You’re killing me here. I can handle it. Not knowing is worse for me, bro. I’ve spent over a year not even knowing whether you were alive or not. Gimme something, Cassie.”

Castiel sighed once more and gave his brother the overview, giving him some details and leaving out many others, including the ones that he hasn’t told Dean because he’s too ashamed.

“Fuck, man,” Gabe said, wiping the tears from his face. “I wish you’d reached out to us, but I get it, I guess. Sort of. Still, I don’t know how you’re sitting there so calm and collected.”

Castiel shrugged at his last statement. He’s used to holding his feelings at bay. “You told me you saw the house, Gabe. Those knife marks on the wall were not accidental. That’s why I didn’t reach out. I didn’t want her to turn her attentions to you and Mom and Dad.”
“Dean know about all this?”

“He doesn’t know about the knife. And there are things he knows that you don’t. And there are things that neither of you know. But he knows most of it, yes.”

“He really cares about you,” Gabe commented softly.

“I know.”

They sat quietly for a couple of minutes until Gabe got back to the original topic and asked, “So what advice did you need from me?”

“No advice, really. I just wanted to make sure that I was reading the situation correctly.”

“Well, think of it this way: What if the situation was reversed and he was saying that shit about himself?”

Castiel thought about that. He told Dean he wouldn’t be a good boyfriend. He told him he’s a fuck-up. He rejected Dean’s efforts to make things work. He gave him the impression that he doesn’t trust him or respect his desires or feelings or opinions (at least when it comes to choosing a boyfriend), which made his heart ache with shame. If Dean was saying these things about himself, if he was treating Castiel in that way, it would be heartbreaking. And frustrating.

He thanked his brother for helping him gain some clarity and they talked a little more, Castiel checking in with him to make sure he would be okay after the bombshell he dropped. Sorrow and regret clenched his heart as he watched Gabe pull himself together. Castiel tended to forget that people cared enough about him to be upset over his ordeal.

So now he sits next to Dean, who looks so happy but curious, too. Sam and Jess have left to run their errands or whatever excuse they gave to exit and give the men some privacy. He offers his hand and Dean takes it readily, smiling.

“So? Don’t you want to know why I decided to be your boyfriend?”

“Yeah,” he chuckles. “But I don’t wanna jinx it.”

“You won’t,” Castiel assures him. “Ask away.”

“Alright… so, why?”

“Well, I spent the evening thinking about what you said and I talked with Gabe—”

Dean can’t seem to help but interject, “I’m sorry, Cas, I know I was kind of an asshole—”

“Hang on,” Castiel commands gently. “I get it, and if I wasn’t convinced before, I certainly am now. You were frustrated with me. And you wouldn’t have been frustrated with me if you weren’t invested. You wouldn’t be invested if you didn’t have some sort of feelings for me. You want to have a relationship with me, to share yourself with me, just like I said I had to do with you that time after we left your parents’, remember that?” Dean nods. “You keep reaching out to me and I keep throwing barriers up. I felt hurt when you said some of those things, but it was because I felt your hurt, and my own hurt from denying myself.” He rubs the facial growth he hadn’t bothered shaving with his free hand and sighs. “Dean… honestly, it’s like this. On the one hand I’m not sure if I can ever give you what you deserve. There are things you don’t know that give me so much shame….” Castiel closes his eyes, feeling the prickling sensation of tears, which strikes him as strange because he never cries for himself. “On the other hand you make me want to try. I never
thought I would ever want anyone ever again. It was so much easier to fly away instead of sticking around to see if someone would be safe for me. I can’t even explain what a scary place my world became when I was with her, and I never wanted to go through that ever again. I still don’t. I think you understand that.

“You were being honest with me yesterday, honest with your feelings. Like I told you before, I know that even though you’re a happy-go-lucky guy, you’re not happy all the time. That is bound to include me at some point, if I am significant enough to you. And I need that. I need to know what my impact is on you and what you want and need. It’s not fair that this should be a one-sided relationship, where I just take and you just give. I don’t want that. I want this to be as good as it can be for both of us, for as long as it can be.”

Dean swallows. “I do, too, Cas.”

“Good.” He smiles. “I need you to promise me a couple of things, though.”

“Anything.”

“Don’t say that until you know what you’re agreeing to,” he chides gently, with affection. “I need you to promise me that you’ll tell me how you’re feeling, even if you think I’ll get upset.” Dean nods. “Okay. Also, I need you to promise me that when this doesn’t work for you anymore, when it’s too much work to be with me or you aren’t feeling like I can give you what you want, that you’ll let me know and we can end it without drama.”

“You’re assuming that there will be a point when this won’t work for me. Don’t I get to decide that?”

Castiel sighs. “Sorry. Force of habit. If it doesn’t work out for you, or if it’s too much work or if you feel like I can’t give you what you want, let me know.”

“I promise,” Dean says, squeezing his hand. “You too, okay? Tell me how you’re feeling and let me know if it’s not working for you. Maybe give me a chance to fix it, though?” he asks with a hopeful grin.

“Yes, okay. Maybe give me a chance to fix it, too,” Castiel agrees with a fond smile. “Um, so should we talk boundaries?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I never have before. You want to? I mean I have none, so...” he laughs.

“Everyone has boundaries, Dean.”

“Uh, okay... well, I’m open to a lot, but no fucking around with other people. I’m a one-person kind of guy. Um, and in terms of sex between us, I’m willing to try anything once, other than that really out-there kind of stuff. Otherwise, I’m pretty touchy-feely, as you probably noticed, so you know, you don’t have to worry about being in my space or asking to touch me or kiss me or whatever.”

Castiel breathes through the anxiety bubbling up like a geyser in his chest. *He’s already talking about sex. He can’t have sex with you. Fuck. This thing is doomed. Why did you ever think this could work?*

“Cas? Where’d you go?” Dean asks, stroking his knuckles.

*Don’t panic. Talk.*
“Just thinking. Um, okay, well. I agree with no other partners, and I’m fine with the physical affection we’ve shared to date. You’ve been very careful with me, and I think we have developed enough of a relationship to, um, signal each other if some touch is okay or not. Actually, since I’ve felt comfortable with everything, perhaps we just need to signal each other if touch is not welcome at that moment. Does that work?” Dean nods enthusiastically and Castiel smiles before worrying his lip between his teeth. “But to be honest, Dean, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to have sex.”

Dean nods again, slowly this time. “Um, okay. Is it something about me?”

“It’s not you,” Castiel whispers, looking away.

“Alright. Um, well, is it something... is it about what happened to you or something else?”

“It’s about what happened to me.”

Castiel sees Dean nod in his periphery. “Well, um… fuck, Cas, I don’t wanna say the wrong thing here, but... are you not interested in sex anymore or are you feeling scared of it? Like, is it something we could work on together or is it just off the table completely? No pressure, I swear, I just wanna know what to expect.”

“I don’t… I don’t know. I honestly don’t know.”

“Okay. Well, um… can we agree to talk about it some more at some point? I mean it’s not like we were gonna have sex right away anyway. We just started dating, you know?”

Castiel feels a swell of hope build and crash into his heart, sweeping it away as he looks at Dean’s sincere eyes. You can’t! But maybe you can. “We can do that,” he says. Dean leans into his space, resting their heads together and stroking the shell of his ear with his thumb until Castiel kisses him, deep and strong and sure of at least this.

***

Dean comes home from an afternoon of conditioning at the motocross track a few towns over and jumps into the shower. “Cause you’re amazing, just the way you are,” he sings at the top of his lungs. He’s still singing when he runs into Sam — literally — in the hall. “Hey man,” he smiles.

“Hey,” he says, rolling his eyes. “Just wanted to see if you drowned in there or not.”

“Ha ha,” he says sarcastically, though he doesn’t really mind his brother’s teasing. He’s in too good a mood to care.

“I’m not sure which is more obnoxious: pining Dean or dating Dean,” he jokes.

Dean playfully flips him off as he makes his way to his room and dries fully. He glances at himself in the mirror. He’s back to his before-accident physique, maybe even a little better with the way he’s been eating lately. It’s his smile, though, that catches him off-guard. He’s always been a happy guy, but damn, he’s happy. He and Cas have only been boyfriends “officially” for a week, since the morning they talked, but it shows. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen so many of his teeth all at once. They haven’t done anything more than hold hands and hug and kiss, but oh… it still makes him feel like he has wings on his feet. He smiles all the damn time now. The guys at the practice track (and the mailman, and the woman at the vegan place) look at him like he’s nuts. Which he is... about Cas. They’ve seen each other every day this week, sharing at least one meal and spending time in Cas’ workshop or bathroom, where Dean’s been helping him tear everything out. Cas has opened up a lot to him physically this week, each kiss a little longer, a little deeper than the last. They leave him drunk with desire.
Tonight is their official third date, though they agreed they’ve sort of been dating unofficially for a while. Their progressive dinner has a Halloween theme. They’re starting with drinks at Benny and Andrea’s since they’re a couple of streets over while everyone else is within a few houses of each other. Cas and Dean have appetizers covered, Charlie has soup and salad, Sam and Jess are making the main dish, and Donna is responsible for dessert. Cas and Dean are announcing their relationship officially tonight, and Dean is pumped. He can’t wait for the evening to start.

Whistling as he dresses in a t-shirt, sweater, and a new pair of jeans, he points finger-guns at himself in the mirror and clucks twice before smoothing his hair and laughing at himself, then slips his phone in his pocket and walks to Cas’. He knocks (he won’t just barge in yet and can’t anyway, since Cas locks the door) and Cas meets him on the threshold, looking gorgeous in a subtly-checked black shirt and black jeans. His mouth waters immediately. “Hey, sweetheart,” Dean smiles.

“Hello, Dean,” he smiles back, moving aside so Dean can step in. Dean leans in and kisses him on the cheek as he passes, loving the pink that sweeps across Cas’ face.

“House looks great. So, what am I doing?”

“We’re making Apple Bites, Black Bean Hummus, and Stuffed Mushroom Eyeballs.” He hands Dean the recipes, then they take out their ingredients and get started. He hums to himself as he mixes up the garlic and beans in the food processor, then throws the rest of the ingredients in and blends until the lumps are gone. He scoops out the grayish mess and plops it into a bowl, then smooths the top and pipes on a soy yogurt spider web, adding a plastic spider to complete it. That done, he starts slicing apples while Cas finishes cutting the sun-dried tomatoes for the eyeballs into tiny pieces that Dean learns will be the veins. A happy satisfaction fills him as he stands near Cas, both of them absorbed in their tasks. He peeks at the dark-haired, blue-eyed man as he works effortlessly and unselfconsciously, the guardedness that marked his first time having Dean in his space gone now. He puts his knife down on the cutting board and leans on the counter, staring at Cas with a soft smile until Cas looks up with a questioning tilt of his head.

“I’m really, really happy right now,” Dean says, easing a lock of hair away from the corner of Cas’ eye. “Everything feels so perfect, you know?”

Cas straightens up and places his knife down. “I know,” he says quietly, like he’s trying not to scare away the moment. He slides a hand from Dean’s shoulder to the back of his neck and pulls him into a slow, gentle kiss. Dean slides one hand to the middle of Cas’ back and the other to the counter, needing to keep himself steady as his head and heart spin. His hand finds the cutting board with the abandoned apples; he reaches blindly to move it away so he is resting on the counter and not the board itself. His fingers alight on the knife as he pushes it back. He feels Cas stiffen as he pulls back and inhales sharply.

“What? What’d I do?” Dean asks in a panic. He throws his hands in the air and stumbles backwards.

“Nothing. Nothing,” Cas says as he gulps in air. His eyes are darting between Dean and the counter; they soften and he takes a few calming breaths. “Nothing,” he says, looping his arms around Dean’s waist and pressing tightly into his chest. “You didn’t do anything. I’m sorry.” Dean holds him, cradling his head as he ruffles the soft strands that are already starting to curl a little despite his recent haircut.

“What was it?” Dean asks tenderly. He knows Cas was triggered by something.

“The knife. You touched the knife while you were holding me.”
A cold sickness settles solidly in his gut. “Fuck. She… a knife?”

“Just once,” he says. “But it was enough. She was drunk and she chased me around the house. She missed every time, thankfully.”

“Sweetheart…”

“Just hold me for a second. Please.” Dean does, feeling Cas relax in his arms with every breath. “I’m okay,” he says finally. “Sorry I ruined the moment. I really was happy.”

“Was?” Dean asks with a pout. He doesn’t want him to think he ruined anything. “We can still be happy. It was just a… blip on the radar.” He cringes at his choice of words, an echo of a phrase Dr. Crowley used once. He doesn’t want Cas to think he’s being dismissive of his experience. He opens his mouth to apologize, but Cas nods.

“A blip. Yes, that’s all it was. Just a quick deviation,” he says, nodding as he talks to Dean’s chest. “Yes,” he says again, looking at Dean’s face this time. Dean smiles because there’s light in his eyes and hope in his voice. “Yes,” he repeats, leading Dean by the hand to the middle of the kitchen. He draws Dean’s face back to his, flicking his eyes down to his lips. “Where were we?” In response, Dean presses his mouth to Cas’, picking up right where they left off as they both sigh in relief. The apples brown and they have to throw them away, but damn, it’s worth it.

Bundled up a bit later after finishing the eyeballs and putting everything away, they make the chilly walk hand-in-hand to Benny and Andrea’s. They greet a very friendly Maine Coon they’ve met up with several times in the area. She trots to them and rubs against their legs, prompting them to rub her ears. Cas goes as far as kneeling to the ground and stroking her from nose to tail, scratching his fingers along her spine and making the cat butt her head against him. She rolls on the ground until he rubs her belly. “Spoiled,” he murmurs affectionately. Dean smiles down at him and tries hard not to think of how he’d like to make Cas purr or how his boyfriend’s hands would feel all over him. “She’s pregnant,” he says, looking up at Dean. “I hope she has a home.”

Dean frowns. “Hope so.” A few minutes later, when they’re standing with their friends in Benny and Andrea’s living room, they find out she does.

“Her name’s Precious,” Andrea explains. “She belongs to Mildred, at the green house over there.”

“Does she know she’s pregnant?” Cas asks, concerned.

“Oh yeah,” Andrea answers. “Just found out. She wasn’t happy about it, either. Her son was supposed to get her fixed, but he brought her to the vet and she was already pregnant.” She stirs cinnamon sticks into glasses and hands them around. “Vegan Pumpkin Spice Martinis,” she says with a proud grin. “I know nothing about vegan stuff, Cas, so I hope you like it.”

Dean swallows hard, nervousness flaring as sweat wets his palms. He can’t believe they’re at the first house and Cas is already having to deal with being the odd one out. He can’t believe he forgot to remind them that Cas doesn’t drink. He can’t believe that… Cas is drinking it.

“It’s delicious, Andrea. Tastes just like pumpkin pie,” he smiles. He takes another sip as she tells him excitedly about asking the grocery store clerk which soy milk tastes best and how to make sure something is really vegan and how she thought about making Jell-o shots and did he know that gelatin isn’t vegan? He takes another sip and nods at her enthusiasm, thanks her for her conscientiousness, and tells her exactly why gelatin isn’t vegan (which kind of turns Dean off to gelatin, if he’s honest). Dean glances over at Sam and Jess and they share an impressed look and a shrug before they turn to converse with Donna and Charlie. Dean turns his attention back to Cas,
who’s now listening to Benny’s idea for an addition to their house. Cas must feel his attention, because he slowly slides an arm around him and hooks his finger into Dean’s belt loop above his hip. Dean feels woozy and giddy, and it isn’t from the alcohol. He rests his arm around his shoulders. Cas keeps his attention on Benny, but smiles and inches closer. Dean sips his drink and joins in the conversation.

When everyone’s ready to move to Cas’ place and is grabbing their coats, Dean pulls him aside. “You okay? I know you don’t drink usually, so, I mean I’m sure they would’ve understood…”

“I’m okay,” Cas smiles, placing a warm hand over Dean’s sternum. “I felt comfortable around all of you enough to give it a try.”

“That’s awesome, sweetheart,” Dean says, his joy breaking out on his face. He takes his hands and kisses the corner of his mouth slowly as he mutters “So proud of you” against it. Cas turns enough to capture Dean’s lips, and they trade the taste of nutmeg and cinnamon between them. Cas giggles, separating their mouths, then turns to the audience that formed while they were lost in each other. Dean blushes and rubs his neck. “Uh, we’re together now,” he mumbles, gesturing between them. He’d wanted to make such an important announcement a much bigger deal.

“No shit,” Benny drawls, making everyone laugh.

“Wait, you guys weren’t together?” Charlie asks, hands on her hips. “Man, was I mistaken!” she exclaims to another round of laughter.

At Cas’ place, they get rave reviews for their eyeballs and hummus and understanding murmurs when Dean says they got distracted and couldn’t finish the apples. “Distracted, riiight,” Sam mutters with an exaggerated roll of his eyes, and knowing laughs fill the living room, where a cheerful fire adds to the cozy atmosphere. Cas seems relaxed, happy to play the host — both so everyone has a good time and so he can escape for a breather every so often, Dean suspects. He doesn’t let anyone upstairs to see his latest project (“too messy and someone could get hurt” is his excuse), but he does show them the “in progress” photos Dean’s encouraged him to take. It’s not much to look at now, but it will be. By request, Cas shows them an album Chuck made for him of some of the other work he’s done for the man, and everyone oohs and ahhs at his work, which is strikingly different depending on the house but just as good. Dean watches his talented boyfriend with a proud little grin.

At Charlie’s, they feast on salad and Veggie Blood Soup, which is eerily red thanks to the vegetables and spices in it. Dean likes the soup, but it seems to creep Cas out a little so he mostly eats salad, which no one seems to notice but Dean. They meet Charlie’s mother, bedridden and cared for by home health workers when she isn’t home. Dean’s heart swells watching Cas stay behind to talk to the unresponsive woman, taking her hand and telling her what a wonderful daughter she raised and murmuring something about being strong and her spirit overcoming the trappings of her physical body. He lets Charlie hug him around the neck and whispers something to her that Dean can’t hear.

At Sam and Jess’, peppers are carved into cute Jack-o-Lanterns for Vegan Stuffed Peppers, and a pumpkin is carved into a bowl for Braised Butternut Squash Risotto. Sully sniffs around everyone’s legs and begs for a taste, which he gets when someone drops a bit onto the floor. Other than his own place, Cas seems most at ease here, and Dean is happy that he’s come to think of the Winchesters’ home as a safe place for him. He starts thinking about his recurring debate with himself about finding a place. He loves being with his family, but he could use his own space and he hates imposing. On the other hand, if things go well, maybe he’ll end up living with Cas. But that house isn’t really Cas’, and he’s not sure if Cas would move in with him or not. His thoughts
get tangled, as they usually do, but when Cas grasps his hand and looks at him with a small, questioning smile, he forgets the knotted mess and kisses his boyfriend soundly.

They end their food tour at Donna’s, where she’s in the middle of tearing out her ex-husband’s man cave in favor of an exercise space. Cas explains that he has something similar at his place (Dean hasn’t seen it yet) and gives her a few tips, for which she thanks him and gives him an unexpected kiss on the cheek that makes him smile (and that makes Dean smile, too). He helps her serve her Salted Caramel Popcorn Balls, Graveyard Mousse, and...

“And, and, look!” Donna squeals. “Homemade candy bracelets!” The women shriek and the men look at each other in amusement. They’re the hit of the party, everyone giving up on looking sophisticated as they lean down to eat off of their wrists.

Everyone parts with happy farewells and see you soons, and Dean walks back with Cas, Sam, and Jess toward their homes. They pause at Jess and Sam’s, where Dean waves before continuing on with Cas to his home next door.

“You didn’t have to walk me home, you know,” Cas teases when they arrive. Dean thinks he’s teasing, anyway. Now he’s not sure. Is he babying him? He thought it was romantic, but maybe Cas sees it as offensive. Or cloying. “Dean,” he says quietly, his hand caressing Dean’s cheek. He smiles at him, warming Dean enough to make him forget the chill of the late October air.

“Wanted to walk my boyfriend home,” he mumbles shyly.

“Aww, dear heart, come here,” Cas says, smoothing his hands over Dean’s arms. Dean meets his gaze with wide eyes. Cas called him a nickname. An endearment. Cas seems to catch on, too, but he just holds their gaze steadily, not apologizing at all. Dean, overwhelmed, sweeps Cas into his arms and kisses him with fire; Cas answers with fire of his own, gripping Dean’s hair and pressing him into the vinyl siding. Dean moans enthusiastically, both because he wants Cas to know it’s okay and because he’s really into it. Cas pulls back anyway, but just for a moment; when Dean smiles and nods, Cas dives right back in. For several minutes their lips stay locked, until Cas lets his lips wander across Dean’s jaw and to his ear, then his neck. Dean grips onto the back of Cas’ jacket for dear life while Cas slinks his hands down to Dean’s hips. Cas repeats his ministrations on the other side until he meets Dean’s lips again, when Dean decides it’s his turn. He kisses Cas’ mouth several times, corner to corner, then keeps going, repeating what Cas did to him. It’s hot and heady and his dick is aching, but he keeps things above the collar save for his hands, which are still gripping his coat around the shoulder blades. He’d love to move his hands lower, but Cas is sensitive about his lower back, for whatever reason. When their lips meet once more, Cas stills there, breathing him in. Dean does the same.

“I enjoyed our date,” Cas smiles toothily against Dean’s lips.

The understatement after such a passionate display is comical, and Dean laughs and pulls him into a hug before kissing him gently once more. “Me too, sweetheart.”

Cas unlocks the door and keys in the security code, then turns back to Dean. “Good night, dear heart,” Cas winks before kissing him lightly and closing the door.

*Good night, sweetheart. I love you*, Dean thinks. “Because I’m happyyyyy,” he sings softly, smiling goofily and grooving his way home.

Chapter End Notes
Warning for physical violence (Cas tells Dean about April’s attempt to stab him)

The songs Dean sings in this chapter are:
“Just the Way You Are,” Bruno Mars
“Happy,” Pharrell Williams

The recipes:

Halloween Apple Bites: https://www.theflamingvegan.com/view-post/Spooktacular-Vegan-Halloween-Treats-1
Sppoky Black Bean Hummus: https://blog.fatfreevegan.com/2008/10/spooky-black-bean-hummus.html
Stuffed Mushroom Eyeballs: https://veganyackattack.com/2012/10/26/stuffed-mushroom-eyeballs/
Vegan Pumpkin Spice Martinis: https://www.veganosity.com/vegan-pumpkin-spice-martini/
Veggie Blood Soup: https://www.onegreenplanet.org/vegan-recipe/veggie-blood-soup/
Vegan Stuffed Peppers: http://wallflowerkitchen.com/spooky-stuffed-peppers/
Braised Butternut Squash Risotto: https://www.veganosity.com/braised-butternut-squash-risotto/
Salted Caramel Popcorn Balls: https://heatherchristo.com/2014/09/30/salted-caramel-popcorn-balls/
Vegan Halloween Chocolate Mousse Graveyard: https://www.abbeyskitchen.com/vegan-halloween-chocolate-mousse/
Homemade Candy Bracelets: https://www.forkandbeans.com/2014/09/15/homemade-candy-bracelets/

Next chapter: Meet the parents, part two :)
“I’m happier than I’ve been in a long time,” Castiel says to Mia.

“Tell me about your ambivalence.”

“What?”

“I can hear it in your voice, in the but that you’re not saying.”

Castiel sighs. Damn her and bless her. How’s that for ambivalence? “I’m afraid it’s going to go to hell.”

“You’re happy and you’re afraid.”

“Right.”

“Hmm. Tell me about it going to hell.”

“Something will happen. Something will make him reject me, or I’ll reject him.”

“You have control over half of that equation.”

“I know.” He sips his tea and pouts at the dreary day outside her window. The leaves are gone from the trees now. Thanksgiving is Thursday. They leave for Gabe and Kali’s tomorrow. “Can we come back to that? I’m worried about seeing my parents again.”

“We can talk about whatever you find helpful. But don’t think I’ll forget,” the therapist says with a knowing twist of her lips. Castiel laughs.

“God, I know, I know,” he jokes. “Do you think they’ll reject me? My parents?”

“I don’t know them. Do you think so?”

“I don’t know. Part of me thinks they won’t, that they’ll love me no matter what. Part of me thinks maybe they will, that the being abused thing or the not contacting them thing or the bi thing will make them decide that life is easier without me in it.”

“Have they ever rejected you?”

“No. But you never know for sure.”

“No, but you can make some educated guesses.”

“I suppose. I’m afraid because I really do want them in my life again, and I want them to like Dean and be accepting of him. I don’t know which will be worse — the pain of not having them by my
choice or the pain of not having them by their choice.”

“So there might be pain.”

“Or there might be a lot of happiness, too,” Castiel concedes before she can suggest it. “Plan for all kinds of possibilities but don’t get too invested in one.” She smiles. They talk a while longer about what he might expect, what he’ll do if he’s triggered, and how to take care of himself during what’s bound to be an exhausting couple of days, happy or not.

“So Castiel,” Mia says toward the end, “tell me about the times so far that you’ve felt rejected by Dean.”

He frowns and shakes his head in confusion. “I haven’t.”

“Alright. Tell me about the number of times you’ve felt happy with him.”

Castiel laughs. “I haven’t counted. There are too many. I’ve told you about a bunch of them.”

“Yes. Interesting how you’ve had so many happy times that you’ve lost count but can recall the exact number of times you’ve felt rejected, which is zero.”

“Point taken,” he surrenders, hands up.

Castiel meets Dean at the hospital, where Dean decided to do a visit to the kids in the children’s unit. When he’s finished, they head up to the neonatal floor. It’s a short visit because there’s only one baby today. Dean can’t hold little Will, since he hasn’t been cleared as a volunteer, but Hannah lets him stay in the room. Dean doesn’t say much, but Castiel notices the misty-eyed smiles pointed at him. He’s certain that Dean would be a very loving, affectionate, and attentive father. The thought alone makes his heart squirm with glee before he tamps it down.

He’ll be a wonderful father with someone else, not with you, Castiel. You can’t be a father. You couldn’t even protect your dog.

He cuddles Will a little closer. After they leave the hospital and eat lunch, Castiel installs the vanity he made for the bathroom, with Dean’s help. They laugh and have a great time, as usual. Dean leaves after supper with a soulful kiss that Castiel feels the rest of the evening.

That night, Castiel prepares for his trip, packing a little extra in case they stay until Friday yet fully prepared not to. He thinks about Dean at his brother’s, doing the same thing, and warmth suffuses his entire being. It wasn’t difficult to get Dean to come with him. All he had to do was ask. Dean was more than willing and even said he was really happy to be spending the holiday with him. He had kissed him “just to convince you how happy I am about it,” and though Castiel doubted a bit, he was mostly convinced — enough not to try to change the man’s mind, anyway. Fully packed, he jumps into the new shower and thinks again about that kiss, and their parting kiss today, and the other kisses they’ve shared. Thinking about Dean makes him smile, then makes his mind wander, something that’s been happening more since they’ve been growing closer. He touches himself, letting the suds from the soap slicken the path. His nipples harden under the roughness of his fingertips and his cock starts to fill against the heat of his palms. He focuses on Dean, imagining his hands roaming his chest, his mouth sucking wetly on Castiel’s skin. His groan echoes in the shower as he pleasures himself. Dean’s hands slide down his chest and around to his back, dropping lower and lower until he… Castiel stops and opens his eyes, reminding himself that in his fantasy, he’s safe and clean and worthy. He swallows and closes his eyes again, trying to encourage the erection that has flagged to return. He imagines Dean again, the pure light of his smile, the warmth of his kisses and touch. Dean’s hands slink lower and cup Castiel’s ass, pulling him closer until their cocks align. Castiel leans against the wall for support as he coaxes his erection, thinking about Dean’s mouth on his. Dean’s hands knead his cheeks, then his fingers slowly slide closer, closer… and then something flashes in his mind and he growls in rage,
slamming his fist against the tile as he gives up on his cock, which sags once again. He sinks to the floor, the water drowning out his screams.

“Morning, sweetheart!” Dean calls brightly when Castiel picks him up the next day. He lets out a surprised, pleased huff when Castiel pulls his face close to kiss him, needing to feel alive and grounded after last night’s failure. He kisses every inch of his face and neck, making them a few minutes late to leave but not caring as Dean kisses him fervently in return, having no idea that he’s pumping hope into Castiel with each press of his lips. With a flushed face and swollen lips, Dean asks, “Not that I’m complaining, because I’m definitely not, but what was that all about?”

Castiel shrugs. “I just… needed you.”

“Well hey, I’m here for you anytime you need me,” Dean says with a cheeky smirk. Castiel regards him warmly and Dean seems to stumble shyly, as he does sometimes around him for whatever reason. “I mean, I am, like, for anything, not just for this. I mean for this, yeah, of course, who wouldn’t be? With you, I mean. ‘Cause look at you. But not just for that, you know?” He stops and shakes his head. “I’m gonna shut up now.” Castiel has to laugh at his boyfriend’s rambling, because it’s adorable, then has to kiss him again, because being with Dean is the best feeling in the world. He hears a little voice that tells him exactly what that feeling is called, followed immediately by another little voice that tells him it’s futile to feel it. He pushes that one aside for now.

The drive isn’t too busy, and they pull into Gabe and Kali’s driveway around 1:00. Gabe races out the door before Castiel has his SUV in park, and as soon as he steps out, he has an armful of big brother. The reunion is a tearful one; Castiel cries for all the pain he’s caused, and Gabriel cries for whatever his reasons are. Kali comes outside and puts an arm around each of them, to welcome Castiel and comfort her fiancé. She welcomes Dean with an embrace, then helps him with their bags; Gabe hasn’t yet let go of him, so neither of them can be much help.

“Fuck, I’m glad you’re here,” Gabriel murmurs, ruffling his hair once they finally separate.

“Me too,” Castiel replies, and means it.

They have lunch and reminisce about some of their childhood antics. Castiel is touched that they went out of their way to make sure they had vegan options for him, and Dean partakes of them with him, which also touches him every time Dean does it. Gabriel, entertaining storyteller that he is, has Dean in stitches. Some of the stories are a little embarrassing, and he has to correct Gabe’s version of events sometimes, but he’s laughing and he’s with his family and Dean and he feels so much more like himself — his before self — until a knock on the door jumpstarts his nerves.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Gabe soothes him. “Probably would’ve been easier if you’d called Dad first rather than springing this on them, but hey, what the hell?” Castiel is beginning to think Gabe is right, but he just couldn’t get himself to call in the weeks before Thanksgiving. Gabe jumps up with Kali and answers the door. He hears his brother telling their parents he has a “big surprise” for them, then he watches him lead them into the living room. He stands and faces his stunned father and serene mother for the first time in several years.


“Hi, Cassie! How was your vacation, dear?” his mother greets him.

He rushes forward to embrace her. She doesn’t know why I was gone. She doesn’t realize how much time has passed. Thank God for the one tiny blessing of her brain injury. “I missed you, Mom,” he whispers in her ear.
“I missed you, too, silly billy! How’s my baby boy?”

“I’m good, Mom. Love you.” He leads her to the couch and kisses her on the cheek, then stands tall to face his father. His father stares at him for an interminable moment before walking to him woodenly. He grasps his face and examines it — for what, Castiel doesn’t know — then moves his hands to his shoulders and looks him over. When their eyes meet again, his father pulls him into his arms and weeps. Tears hover in his own eyes, regretful for the pain he’s caused him; he clings to his father’s shirt as he subtly supports the man falling apart in his arms.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel murmurs. He pulls back from his father to look him in the eyes. “I did it to protect you and Mom,” Castiel explains softly. “April, she was… cruel. I had to leave her. My life depended on it. But I was afraid she would hurt you if she suspected you knew where I was. Mom, she’s so… she’s vulnerable, Dad. I couldn’t risk it.”

Watching and listening carefully, his father seems to understand. “Thank God you’re alright,” he says, kissing him on the cheek and hugging him again. Castiel melts into his father’s warm, strong arms.

“Ollie, come meet Dean!” Castiel’s mother urges. His father looks to his left, and Castiel’s stomach clenches. “Ollie, he rides motorcycles!”

Castiel holds his breath as his father walks toward Dean and his mother. His mother has clearly asked him two of the three questions she asks new people — Who are you? and What do you do? — but he’s not sure whether she’s gotten to the third — Are you married? Before her injury, she joked with him and his brother a lot about their single status and told them she asked every woman she met at church these questions. It was one of their last conversations before her injury five years ago.

“Hello, Dean. I’m Oliver. Ollie,” his father says, holding out a hand, “and I see you’ve met Beth.”

“Pleasure to meet you both,” his boyfriend says nervously. Boyfriend. Okay. Here we go.

“Cassie! He’s not married and he likes you! I asked him!” she says, beaming. His cheeks flush with heat at the same time as Dean’s. He crouches down to talk to her.

“I know, Mom,” he says, and adds before he chickens out, “He’s my boyfriend.” He looks up to Dean, who’s biting his lip and watching him with something akin to awe. His heart overflows with that wonderful feeling again. Certain that this is right, he takes Dean’s hand to bring him down to their level. “Dean is my boyfriend. Do you understand?” he asks gently, showing her their joined hands.

“Dean is your boyfriend,” she repeats after him.

“Yes. What do you think?”

“I’m glad for you, dears,” she says casually, her fuschia-lipsticked lips curling into a bright smile as she pats their hands. Castiel is relieved, and he feels Dean’s relief right next to him. Dean squeezes his hand in comfort as they stand to face his father.

“What do you think, Dad?” he asks nervously.

He gives them a thoughtful look before saying, “Well, I guess if you wanted to distract me from your being gay by disappearing for a year and a half and then coming back for Thanksgiving, mission accomplished.” Castiel imagines himself as a trout head in the fish department, wide-eyed and mouth gaping and unable to think. He’s still scrambling for some response when his father
guffaws and slaps him on the shoulder. “Gotcha,” he says.

“Jesus, Dad,” Castiel mumbles without thinking, pinching the skin between his brows. His father lays a brawny, work-worn hand on his shoulder.

“Watch your language,” he chides gently before saying, “It’s okay, Cassie. It’ll take me some getting used to, but you’re my son and I love you and nothing’s going to change that. If you’re happy, I’m happy.”

Castiel breathes a sigh of relief as Dean and his dad exchange more pleasantries. His dad — in his typical dry, dark-humored way — is trying to tell him that Castiel’s disappearance hurt much more than he’s letting on, but he’s willing to let go and move forward, accepting Castiel for what he had to do and who he is as a person. The heaviness lifts from his heart and his shoulders, and he thinks things are going to be okay.

That night, everyone retires early because of all of the emotional and physical exhaustion. Dean and Castiel are sharing one of the guest rooms. This is stupid, Castiel thinks in the dark. You’re being stupid. Castiel is in a comfortable bed while Dean is on the floor with several blankets, not complaining one bit. You can do this. Castiel checks the pins between his shirt and pajama pants to make sure they’re secure, then climbs out of bed. He scooches down to take Dean’s hand. “Come sleep in the bed,” he whispers.

“Are you sure?”

“Just sleeping,” Castiel warns him.

“Yeah, of course, no problem.”

“Then yes, I’m sure. Come on.” Dean scrambles to follow and settles next to him, leaving plenty of space between them. He can practically hear Dean smiling. He’s smiling, too. He rolls over to his side, facing Dean, and Dean does the same.

“Maybe one kiss,” Castiel says. He’s sure his voice sounds too eager, but he can’t help himself.

“One kiss,” Dean agrees. “But just one.”

“Right.”

They join together, sighing and humming through one very, very long kiss.

Castiel wakes a few times in the night — from sleeping in a strange bed or with a partner, he’s not sure. He startles each time he sees Dean, and his eyes automatically scan him and the room for any sort of danger. Each wakeful time is shorter until the last time, in which he barely startles and Dean’s presence is comforting instead of fear-inducing. In the morning, Castiel wakes in the same position he started in — facing Dean, curled into himself. Dean is sprawled across his own side on his back, snoring softly without a care. He used to sleep like that, too. He gets up to use the bathroom and, when he returns, Dean is awake. He relaxes visibly upon Castiel’s return.

“Hey. Everything good?”

He peers at him warmly. “Everything’s great,” Castiel says, sinking to his knees on the floor beside him. He rests their foreheads together and wraps his arms around him, breathing him in and silently thanking him for everything he’s brought to Castiel’s life.

Thanksgiving is a blur of food and stories and explanations and emotions. Dean and his mother
become fast friends; he has infinite patience for her repetitive questions and delights in the look on her face when he shows her videos of his rides. He overhears him promise her that when they come to visit her in Rhode Island, they’ll find a track and he’ll take her for a ride. Knowing Dean, it is not just lip service paid to a woman who will likely forget. Dean fits in well with his father, Gabe, and Kali, too, arguing football and politics with equal fervor and winning them over with his goodness and light. Castiel’s soul dances in joy, and when Gabe asks if they’ll stay one more night, neither of them hesitates. They spend the night in the same bed again, allowing themselves two kisses this time. He only wakes twice.

They say warm goodbyes to his parents and his brother and sister-in-law and drive back to Maine in a mix of clouds and light flurries. Christmas is coming, Castiel remembers. Maybe he’ll go to Mass this year. Maybe he and Dean will do something with Castiel’s family. Maybe with Dean’s.

“Have you talked with your mother yet, Dean?”

“Hell no, Cas,” Dean grumbles.

“Is she still trying to contact you?”

“Yeah. And I don’t care. What she did was wrong. Period.”

“I know it was, Dean, but most people are good, and you said yourself she’s not usually like that. If you listen to her, she might be able to explain herself. Perhaps she’s had some time to think. I’m willing to try.”

“I’m not.” He folds his arms and stares straight ahead.

“Dean. You love her.”

“I lo— I know, but I’m still pissed.”

“Life’s short, dear heart.” Dean grunts, but softens and shifts to look his way. Castiel takes his hand. “She’s your mom. Just think about it, okay?”

Dean exhales harshly but kisses Castiel’s hand tenderly, saying all he’s going to say about the matter for now, it seems. Castiel squeezes his hand and keeps driving.

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Dean spends the rest of the ride home thinking off and on about his mother. He loves his mom, but he’s pissed, so pissed. Under that anger, though, is hurt, for Cas, Sam, Jess, and himself — Cas for obvious reasons, Sam for similarly obvious reasons, Jess because she’s walked the road with Sam and has been Dean’s confidante and knows their pain, and himself because he loves Cas and because his mom knew he had feelings for him and pushed things anyway. She didn’t trust his judgment and interfered in things that weren’t her business.

When he isn’t thinking about his mother, he’s thinking about the last few days with Cas. Cas holding the baby… holy shit, he knew that would do him in. He’s always been a sucker for a strong, sweet guy, and the way Cas held Will so tenderly in his huge hands, snuggling him against his bare chest (which was friggin’ gorgeous up close)... well, he couldn’t help it if the fantasies of them raising kids together just wouldn’t stop looping in his brain. Meeting his parents was awesome, too. His sweet mom and Cas’ equally sweet treatment of her, his hilarious dad and brother, and Cas’ joy and openness with his family made his Thanksgiving so much better, even if he wasn’t spending it with his own family. Cas coming out to his parents and everyone’s acceptance of Dean into their family and of them as a couple was incredible, too. And of course,
sleeping with Cas was definitely a highlight. He feels so right with him. So in love. And Cas’ willingness to try again with his mom… it just makes him love him even more. He wishes his mother had given Cas a chance. If she had, she’d know how wonderful Cas is.

“She didn’t give you a chance,” Dean says after a long silence.

“She can’t give me a chance if you don’t give her another chance,” Cas replies. And damn him, he’s right.

“You are a fuckin’ saint, Cas,” he declares, swallowing thickly. “How are you so damn awesome?”

“I’m not anything special, Dean. I’m certainly no saint, and I don’t want you to think that I’m perfectly fine with how she treated me. I’m still upset with her. But she struck me more as wounded, scared mama bear than vicious predator, and I can understand the need to protect, especially with everything that happened to Sam. And she’s important to you, and you’re important to me, so I’d like to give her an opportunity, at least. And I want you to know that you can have a relationship with her, even if I don’t.”

“Shit, Cas,” Dean says. “The next rest stop we come to, pull over so I can give you a big-ass hug, alright?” Cas laughs and says he will.

Dean opens his phone and scans some of the multiple texts he’s received from his mom:

You don’t know him that well

How do you know you can trust him?

You’re falling for him so fast

I was just trying to protect you

I’m sorry

I miss you

Please call me

On and on they go, getting less self-righteous and indignant and more sorrowful with each day. Dean sighs and types:

To Mom 3:48pm: We will hear you out, but I have conditions.

Her response is immediate:

To Dean 3:48pm: Okay

To Mom 3:49pm: One, you have to come here, to Sam’s. We’re not going to you. Two, if you want to have a meal with us, we’re not accommodating you. We’re eating a vegan meal. If you want something else, you have to bring it. Three, you WILL apologize to Cas.

To Dean 3:53pm: When?

To Mom 3:53pm: I’ll let you know.

Cas pulls into the service plaza and Dean hurries out of the vehicle, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he waits for Cas on his side. Cas smirks affectionately at him and opens his arms. Dean lays
a big-ass hug on him, as promised, and a big-ass kiss for good measure. They get drinks and snacks before settling back into Cas’ SUV.

“Contacted my mom,” Dean says before Cas can turn the key. He shows him the text messages.

“Dean. We can certainly accommodate her. You all accommodate me—”

“She didn’t, and she made a damn show of it. No.”

Cas rolls his eyes at Dean’s stubbornness. “She doesn’t have to apologize—”

“Like hell she doesn’t.”

“—if she doesn’t mean it,” Cas finishes. “I’d rather not have an insincere apology.”

“Yeah, well, she needs to know her actions have consequences.”

“Consequences happen whether she apologizes or not. Some of the consequences have happened already. You haven’t been speaking to her. Other consequences, good or bad, will happen as a result of our getting together once again, no matter if there’s an apology.”

Dean frowns but nods. “Yeah, I get it. Let’s just see what happens, I guess.”

After speaking with Sam, Jess, and Cas, Dean messages his mother and tells her they can do the next day at noon, and she agrees. Dean was sort of hoping she wouldn’t. He’s not sure if he’s ready for this. He thinks about it that night in his lonely bed, missing Cas’ presence already.

Cas comes back to the Winchester house late morning, after spending time running in the early morning with Dean (who really hates running in the dark and cold) and then going home to shower and take care of some things. He’s dressed in jeans that hang off his hips, which are so hot, though he can’t appreciate them fully because he has a tucked-in t-shirt and a long-sleeved shirt with a long shirttail hanging over his ass. He likes it better when he tucks everything in so he can appreciate the view. His hair is combed neater than usual and still slightly damp, which means it’ll fluff up once it dries and he’ll look frickin’ adorable. He hugs him and inhales the saltwater scent of his soap. No sawdust smell today since he hasn’t worked in a few days. He misses it.

They make a vegan meatloaf out of lentils and mushrooms; Cas guides them on how to cook the lentils just right so they don’t get soggy. Dean is mesmerized by the ingredients oozing through Cas’ strong hands as he mixes everything together; he’s imagined those same powerful hands manhandling him in bed, and watching him take command over the food, bending it to his will, is strangely erotic in ways he doesn’t really want to ponder. He shakes himself out of his stupor when Cas asks him to chop the broccoli. Cas stands beside him soon after, chopping onions for the gravy, and plants a kiss onto his temple. It eases his nerves instantly, and when Jess coos at them and calls them cute, he laughs at Cas’ blush and kisses him full on the mouth in return (putting the knife down first). They finish their prepwork happily and relax in the living room with drinks (no alcohol for Cas this time, Dean notices), telling Jess and Sam about their visit to Cas’ family. Dean wishes it could stay like this. But it doesn’t.

Sam gets up when the doorbell rings. “Here we go,” he mutters just loud enough for everyone to hear, though Dean thinks he probably didn’t mean for that to happen. He and Jess have already spoken to their mother about how everything went down and their feelings about it and, according to him, they got a long, sincere apology from her, so his nervous anticipation is probably centered around Dean and Cas. “Hey guys!” he greets them. He hears coats shuffling and shoes clunking to the floor. A moment later, their parents are in the living room.
“Hi John, hi Mary,” Jess greets them. She looks wary, but she hugs them both anyway. “Good to see you. Come on in. Lunch is almost ready.” Mary thanks her and sits, staring at her hands, while John strides over to Dean and Cas.

“Good to see you, son,” John says, embracing Dean, which is okay with him. He’s not the one who treated Cas so poorly. He turns to Cas and offers his hand. “Cas, good to see you.”

“And you, John,” Cas replies. His tiny but genuine smile for his father relieves Dean more than he can say. “Looking forward to ice fishing season?”

“Oh yeah,” John says, and launches into his plans to travel with some buddies to a remote cabin up north sometime in January. His father fills the time until lunch is ready, when they all shuffle to the table. Mary still hasn’t said a word. Dean and Sam place the food on the table for everyone to help themselves. John’s food looks like a mountain next to Mary’s molehill. “Damn, son, this is great,” John mutters through a huge bite. “I mean it’s not meat, but it’s still good.”

“Cas made it,” Dean mumbles through a huge bite of his own. “Cas, this friggin’ gravy is… ugh, so friggin’ good.”

Cas chuckles. “Thank you, Dean.”

John smiles and turns toward Cas. “So you’re vegan. Why’s that, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Dean feels nervous, not knowing where this conversation will go, but Cas explains his point of view and John listens thoughtfully, then John explains why he believes being an omnivore is healthier and Cas listens just as thoughtfully. Neither changes the other’s mind, but both have smiles on their faces and neither takes offense at the other’s opinion. It’s so pleasant that Dean almost forgets his mother is sitting awkwardly by John’s side. She’s eaten all of the food, he notices, and accepts seconds when Jess offers after taking her own. After enjoying a vegan pumpkin pie that Sam made, they all take coffee into the living room. The room is quiet as everyone sips; no one seems to quite know what to do from here. Finally, Mary places her cup down and clears her throat.

“Can Cas and I have some time alone?” Mary requests.

Everyone starts to murmur their assent, but Cas says, “Without wishing to offend you, Mrs. Winchester, I believe that’s a question only I should be answering and, frankly, I would prefer not to be alone with you, though if you insist I shall acquiesce to your wishes.” He offers her his fake smile. John, Sam, and Jess stare at their laps and Dean looks at Cas with a mixture of pride and concern — pride for speaking up and concern that Cas feels unsafe yet is still giving her the option to walk all over him. Dean plants himself down deeper into the couch and takes his hand, showing his mother and Cas that he’s not going anywhere.

Mary squirms and nods. “Alright. I deserve that.” She sighs heavily. “I want to apologize to you, Cas. My behavior was inexcusable.”

“What behavior was that?” Cas asks with just enough innocence in his voice to cover the fact that he’s poking into her apology to see if it’s sincere.

“I offered you food that I knew you didn’t eat rather than an empty plate for what Dean brought. I pushed you about your background and your intentions. I didn’t give you a chance to… well, I just didn’t give you a chance at all, really.” She clears her throat and wrings her hands. “I… I kept pushing at what must be a very sensitive topic for you simply because I didn’t believe you, rather than consider that it might be true. So, I’m sorry about all of that.”
“May I ask why you chose to behave that way?”

She sighs. “I… I’ve always been protective of my boys. They’re both very good-hearted, trusting people who let people in too easily sometimes. They’ve been hurt in relationships before, and Sam…” she stops.

“He knows, Mom,” Sam tells her gently.

She breathes deeply and nods. “Well, I guess you know about Sam. I felt so powerless, knowing after the fact that my child had been hurt. After everything he went through I swore I wouldn’t let another person hurt my sons ever again, not if I had some way of stopping it. So, with all that and Dean’s very clear crush on you, I was already on guard and not feeling very hospitable.”

Dean feels his face burning at the crush comment. Cas gives his hand a quick squeeze.

“You were different than Jessica. I was cautious with her, too, but they were friends first and she was so open. Dean knew so little about your past, yet it didn’t seem to bother him and that scared me. And then, when you told us about your abuse… well, you’d think that would’ve made me more sensitive to you, but it just made me more protective of Dean. I thought you’d found out about Sam somehow and that you were using that information to make up a story about yourself that would draw Dean to you.”

“I understand,” Cas says through his mannequin-smile.

Sounds pretty damn convoluted, Dean thinks.

“So, those are my reasons, but they’re not excuses. I really didn’t give you a chance, and that was wrong.” His mother takes a deep breath. “You’re obviously very important to Dean.”

“He is,” Dean says as Cas replies, “He’s very important to me.” Dean glances at Cas and Cas looks back, tightening his grip around Dean’s fingers and smiling at him genuinely.

“Yes, I see that,” she comments as she flicks her eyes between them. “So, if you plan to be in Dean’s life for a while, then I’d like to get to know you, and I want you to know that you are welcome in our home.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Winchester, for your apology and your welcome,” Cas acknowledges her with a nod and that smile. “If I may, what would be most helpful to me in moving forward from this is an apology to Dean.” She tilts her head questioningly as Dean’s breath grows shallower. This wasn’t part of his plan, and he hates conflict. Now that she’s apologized to Cas, he just wants to move on and forget it. “I don’t want to speak for Dean, but it’s my impression that your treatment of his guest implied that you didn’t respect his opinion or trust his judgment, and I believe he was deeply hurt by that. I am working on a similar issue,” he admits, glancing at Dean sheepishly. It warms him to hear Cas admit such a thing and that it’s important to him and he’s working on it. “So, if you feel moved to do so with sincerity, then that would be the most meaningful thing you could do to make amends with me.”

“Apologizing to my son for hurting him would help you and I move past this,” she clarifies. When he drops the fake smile in favor of a more serious but sincere nod of his head, she smiles. “Hmm. I appreciate you looking out for him, Cas.” Their eyes lock for a moment as they seem to develop a silent understanding between them. She turns to Dean.

Dean doesn’t want to do this. He really, really doesn’t. It’s hard to feel hurt, yes, but it’s harder to have a conversation about it because it involves all kinds of uncomfortable feelings and the
potential for a lot of conflict. He doesn’t really like to get into conflict, particularly about himself, and when he does it’s because he sort of falls into it, not being able to contain his feelings anymore, rather than having a conversation about it deliberately. He knows it’s important, though — all those self-help books and videos and his relationship with Cas have taught him that — and he knows that the only way around a conflict is to go through it. So he goes.

“Cas is right, Mom. It hurt. When I told you he was coming and you freaked out and passed all these judgments on him, it was like saying to me, ‘Clearly he can’t be a good guy because you picked him, Dean,’ you know?”

“That’s not what I meant, honey…”

“I know, but that’s how it felt. And yeah, he was saying no to dating right then, but you didn’t know the reasons and you just assumed that I was letting myself get used rather than trusting that I knew what I was doing.” Now that the words are coming out, he feels good. Empowered. Free. The words keep coming. “And then when you met him, you didn’t even give him a chance, even though you knew I had feelings for him, and you were so rude. I felt so embarrassed that my own mother would treat anyone that way, let alone someone special to me. I felt fuckin’ horrible that I brought him there, someplace I thought was safe. I didn’t even want to go to dinner that night, you know. I wanted to spend my last night with him alone, but I felt bad and he didn’t want me to to feel bad, so he offered to go with me so I wouldn’t have to choose. He did something really nice that was hard for him to do and what did he get for it? He got shit on. How was I supposed to feel about that? And you just pushed him and pushed him and I froze up and he was left defending himself against a practical stranger when I should’ve spoken up, except that I shouldn’t’ve had to do it at all because you shouldn’t have treated him like that, and that sucked. You hurt me, and you hurt him and that hurt me, and you hurt Sam and Jess and that hurt me, and I couldn’t do what I should’ve done and that hurt me, too. It messed me up, and it messed up my trust in you.”

Dean looks away, feeling raw and exposed, and wipes his face with his free hand. He glances at Cas, who encases his hand in both of his and rubs it in much the same way as that disastrous day, then tilts his head minutely toward him with a soft gaze. It’s enough to make him want to cry, but he doesn’t. Maybe later he will, but not now.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” Mary says. He turns his attention back to her. Tears fill her eyes, which is unusual for her. “You’re right about everything. I didn’t want you to get hurt, but I also wasn’t sure if you could protect yourself from getting hurt. So, rather than trusting you to make good choices and to be able to help yourself if your choice wasn’t good, I became your bodyguard. But in doing that I became a bully, and that wasn’t right, even if my intentions were good. I’m sorry for not trusting you, and for embarrassing you, and for making you feel like you couldn’t bring anyone to our home or that you couldn’t make your own choices. You’re an adult, and a very successful one. You do have good judgment. And even if you did make a mistake, or it didn’t turn out like you hoped, I should’ve made it comfortable for you to come to me.” She glances at Sam. “I will work very hard to butt out and trust you more. All of you. And I’m very sorry I hurt you. I love you and I want us to be okay again, so I’ll do whatever I need to do to help us move forward.”

Dean nods, pressing his lips together. “Thanks, Mom.”

The room falls quiet again, as before. It’s meditative, thoughtful, but also awkward as hell. Cas breaks the silence in the best way. “So!” Cas says, clapping his hands. “Who’d like to drink and play poker?” There’s a bit of forced brightness in his voice, but a lot of sincerity, too, and it breaks the tension as everyone laughs and moves to gather at the table. Jess whispers something in his ear and returns with what Dean knows is lemon-flavored seltzer water on ice; she places it next to him with a kiss to his cheek. Dean’s heart is doing somersaults at Cas’ acceptance of Jess’ affection. He
applies a kiss to Cas’ other cheek, making the man grin and turning those somersaults into full-out backflips and other fancy flips Cas would probably know the names of since he was on the cheering team and all. He kisses him again, just because he loves him.

Dean and his mom hug when it’s time for them to go. He’s still a little wary, but he thinks they’ll survive this and maybe even come out stronger than before. Cas says goodbye to his parents with handshakes and a “Goodbye, John” and a “Goodbye, Mrs. Winchester.” It’s better than he’d hoped for.

That night, after a simple supper at Cas’ and a lot of making out, Dean falls asleep on Cas’ couch while watching a movie. He wakes up in the morning on that same couch, blankets tucked around him, and smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Cas’ mom is based on my sweet grandmother. :) 

Bring your tissues and comfort items for next time. It’s a heavy chapter. <3
The gray sky is a portend to the day. Castiel just doesn’t know it yet.

It’s a week before Christmas, and Castiel is checking off his to-do list as he sips his tea and taps his stockinged feet against the floor. Send paint colors to Chuck even though he’ll make me choose, check. Send the quote for the sliding barn door to Chuck’s buddy, check. Finish Christmas shopping, check. It’s been a while since he’s had so much to do right before the holiday. Last year, Chuck was in town so they had a small celebration before he left to see his parents in Tucson. This year, he has a new partner and he’s going to spend the holiday with her, so he visited early and they celebrated a few days ago. He met Dean and they got along well, which felt important to Castiel for some reason. Castiel gave Chuck tickets to a show he’s been talking about. Chuck gave him some new tools and the referral to his friend. He really wants Castiel to expand his business. It makes sense, Castiel supposes. He’ll be done the house soon. He only has the office, master bedroom, and the small bathroom off the master bedroom to complete, and those won’t take much longer. The master bedroom will be last. Chuck wants to come home to consult on that one specifically before he starts it. Once that happens, though, he expects he’ll be done all of the projects by the beginning of spring, and then he assumes he’ll have to move. Chuck’s never told him expressly, but why put all the effort into a home if you’re not going to live there at least some of the time? He’s called this project his “labor of love,” and he seems to have an affection for the home. He must want to live in it, perhaps during the summer when it’s too hot to live at his other homes, and he’s certain he won’t want a roommate, particularly if things develop between him and his new partner. Castiel will need to find a new place to live as well as a workspace to rent or purchase. Can he put himself through the stress of starting a business again? Maybe he’ll just work at Home Depot. He shivers at the thought of all the people and the loss of freedom and creativity and shakes his head, frowning as if he’s tasted something awful. He sighs and pushes those thoughts aside for now. He’ll deal with all of that after the holidays.

He smiles when the timer goes off on the oven. He sings “Sleigh Ride” (Dean’s been singing carols for weeks and he’s picked up some of his boyfriend’s habits) as he slides a mitt onto his hand and pulls out the Red Velvet Crinkles. They will be a festive addition to the powdery Amaretto Snowballs and jammy Pistachio Apricot Thumbprints he made earlier. Dean will be over in a little while; he’s helping Benny assemble Andrea’s Christmas gift at their house. They plan to eat cookies and watch Christmas movies all afternoon and, if the weather gets too frightful (and the fire is so delightful, ha ha), maybe he will let Dean spend the night in his bed. They haven’t slept in the same bed since Thanksgiving, and though it still fills him with a bit of apprehension to let Dean into his safest, most sacred space, he’s been working on it with Mia and he wants to wake up with his boyfriend next to him. He thinks. He tamps down the quick flash of anxiety and smiles as he thinks of sleepy, rumbly Dean, stretching languorously next to him, completely comfortable in his own body like Castiel used to be. He feels blood slowly filling his penis, so he walks away from the kitchen and into the living room. Lying on the couch, he lifts the too-short t-shirt from the car museum, lowers the sweatpants sitting on his hips, and lets his hand wander and explore. Each
time this happens, he’s never able to finish, but he’s determined to keep working on it. Even if he’ll
never be with Dean that way, there’s a part of him that remembers *before*, remembers the rush of
orgasm, self-induced or not. It’s a pleasure he’d like to have back. He breathes and hangs on to the
image of Dean’s body spread out next to him… of Dean rolling over and kissing him… of Dean’s
arms wrapping around him, pressing them together… of Dean rolling him to his belly, his hands
floating lower and lower until…

A sharp breath pulls Castiel away from his happy fantasy. He looks at his deflating dick and
growls in frustration, throwing one of the decorative pillows across the room. See? *Told you you’re broken. Shut up.* He stares at the ceiling, debating whether he should try again or just take a
shower and get dressed like he’d originally planned, when there’s a knock at the door. His gut
jumps a little at the unexpected visitor. He puts himself together and relaxes when he sees Dean
through the peephole. He’s early. Giving one more check of his clothes, he unlocks the door and
lets him in, quickly realizing that not all is well.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Dean says in greeting as he blinks a snowflake from his eyelashes, “can you
help us? We think Benny’s neighbor’s cat had her kittens but she’s under her porch and we can’t
reach her. We figured you’re the Animal Whisperer”—Castiel chuckles and Dean grins—“and
she likes you so maybe you can coax them out? It’s gonna storm and we’re worried about ‘em and
Mildred’s all freaked out about ‘em.”

Castiel hears the urgency and concern in his voice and doesn’t think twice. He slips into his steel-
toed work boots and a tan, waist-length L.L. Bean jacket he wears in the workshop sometimes,
then sets the alarm and locks the door before following his boyfriend to his car. When they arrive
at Benny’s neighbor’s house, Mildred is peeking through her curtain and Benny is on the ground,
talking through the decorative porch skirting that Castiel knows will need to be removed for the cat
extraction effort, at least temporarily (it should probably be replaced, his professional mind says,
but that’s not his concern right now).

“Hey, brother, glad you could make it,” Benny says with a smile and a meaty handshake.

“Happy to help. Where are they?”

Benny explains the situation, even though Dean already filled him in, and he shows them where
Precious and her babies are. Castiel thinks for a minute as the men watch him expectantly.

“Alright. We need a pry bar to take off the skirting. For the cats, we need a large box with towels to
put them all in, and we need to figure out where they’re going. Is she keeping them? Until they’re
weaned, anyway?” he asks, pointing to the house.

“Yeah,” Benny answers.

“Alright. I’ll talk to her.” While Dean and Benny trot to Benny’s house to find the pry bar and an
acceptable container for the little family, Castiel speaks to Mildred, explaining that he has to take
off the skirting and will patch it back up after. She confirms that she will care for the mama and
her kittens with help from her son and daughter-in-law and from Benny and Andrea, who’d already
offered. Castiel is touched but not surprised by their generosity; he has enjoyed them the more he’s
gotten to know them. She gives him some of the cat’s food to try to lure Precious out.

The flakes that had been melting into the ground are sticking now, and a light dusting of snow is
covering the grass and the men who are waiting for him. Castiel shivers a little as he removes the
skirting, mindful of keeping the bottom of his jacket below the waistline of his sweats. Some of the
brittle wood breaks in his hands as he removes it, and he makes a mental note to replace it for her
in the spring. He lies prostrate on the ground; the snow wets his sweatpants and chills him. Benny
lights the space with a flashlight and Castiel sees the glow of Precious’ yellow-green eyes. “Okay, sweetheart,” he murmurs to the protective mother. “Hi, Precious. Oh, look at your sweet babies. We just want to get you someplace warm and safe. The weather’s going to be bad.” He offers some food and rests quietly for a while to see if she’ll approach. She doesn’t, but she’s not too far away, either. Castiel would prefer that she come out on her own, but he’ll pull her out if he has to.

“Anything yet?” Dean asks.

“Not yet.”

They give the mama some time, but as the snow starts to fall a little faster, Castiel makes the decision for her.

“I’m going to start taking the kittens,” Castiel calls out to the waiting men. “Be ready with the box, please.” He pulls the first kitten away and squirms out of the tight space. Dean places the wide box that used to hold some sort of heating equipment on the ground next to Castiel and moves the towel that he was using to keep the snow out. Castiel gently places the tiny newborn into the box, then crawls back in for the second kitten while Dean covers the first with a dry towel to keep it warm. He repeats the process for the third kitten, leaving only the mother to follow. She eyes Castiel warily.

“I know you’re wondering where your babies are,” he speaks softly to her. “They’re safe. Come see your babies. Come on.” He tries to call to her with kissing sounds, rubbing his fingers together; she looks at him curiously but doesn’t come. Resigned, he crawls in further until he has her in his arms. His victory is short-lived as he realizes he has a different problem now: he has to get himself out of there. He’s much further in than before and the space isn’t really made for a man his size; he had been lucky to get out as easily as he did the last few times. Holding her in both hands, he slowly inches his way backwards, wriggling a bit at a time so he doesn’t upset her and doesn’t gouge himself on the debris in the area. He doesn’t realize his jacket catches on a broken piece of skirting, pulling his shirt up with it, until he feels a chill that sends a deeper, more sinister chill through his entire body. Before he can utter a prayer that they won’t notice, Benny speaks.

“Brother, you lose a bet or somethin’? Some kinda fraternity hazing? Or were you just wasted?”

He feels Benny’s finger tickle the horrid tattoo on his lower back. He takes a quick breath in order to keep his voice steady. They know. They know all about you now. You aren’t safe. But who cares, because you’re disgusting.

“No, you’re not!

Yes, you are.

“I was out-of-my-mind intoxicated,” Castiel answers from under the porch with a fake laugh. It’s true, though not even close to the whole truth. Even though he wants to scream, wants to run away and hide his shame forever, he can’t do that yet. Precious needs help, and he still needs to patch up the skirting enough to keep animals out. He puts on his smile and breathes until he’s stuffed his emotions in a dark corner of his heart, where they can’t touch him. Someone (Dean, he’s fairly certain) unhooks his jacket and shirt, and he manages to worm his way out with the unhappy cat in his arms. He barely glances at Dean as he places Precious into the box, wanting him to think hey, nothing significant happening here! “Can you get them inside? We need to make sure they’re warm.” He turns away and says to Benny, “Can I get some tools from you? Just a hammer and a few nails.” He smiles as if everything is fine, which it most decidedly is not. Benny seems none the wiser, though, and he agrees and turns toward his house. Castiel follows, acknowledging Dean calling his name only with a wave and a “Be right back!”
“Never pictured you for a tattoo guy, Cas,” Benny comments conversationally.

“I’m not,” he says with a smile and a little laugh. *Fake it. Fake it until you’re safe.* “Just a stupid, drunken night with my college buddies.” He winces internally at the lie that rolls off his tongue without thought. He got too caught up in his thoughts to think of anything better, something that made more sense. Benny chuckles and doesn’t seem to think anything of it, which is a relief.

“I got a bunch,” Benny says, which Castiel knows because he wears them proudly. “Got one I regretted, but Pam covered it up good. Never tattoo the one you think is forever on your skin, man,” he laughs.

“Seems like good advice,” Castiel agrees. They arrive at Benny’s house and he opens his garage.

*Don’t follow him in, that’s not safe!*  
*He’s okay — he’s a safe person. Most people are good.*

**Bullshit.**

Castiel follows him into the garage but stays by the door. Benny flicks on the lights and rummages around. “Aha!” he exclaims, finding what he’s looking for. He smiles at Castiel and claps him on the shoulder. Castiel is proud of himself for not flinching. *Still got the skills.* He keeps his smile glued to his face as they walk back to Mildred’s and Benny blathers on about something. Castiel isn’t paying much attention.

“I’m going to get this fixed,” Castiel says as the snow gets heavier. “Would you see if Dean and Mildred need any help?”

“Sure, brother,” Benny says. “Lemme know if you need anything. Thanks for all your help with this.” He brushes snow off his cap and climbs the porch steps to head inside.

Dean is out the door the second Benny steps inside, as Castiel predicted he would be. Everyone loves a freakshow. “Um, you alright?” he asks.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Well, my fingers are getting a little cold,” Castiel says, feigning nonchalance as he focuses on patching the skirting so he can reinstall it and get the hell out of there. Dean seems surprised, so he must’ve sounded convincing enough.

“Oh. You are? Really?”

“Yeeeah,” he says, turning to face him and drawing out the syllable as he draws out the casual lie he tells right to his boyfriend’s face. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Dean scratches behind his ear, then rubs his neck. “Um, just, you know, the tattoo, that’s all.”

Even if Dean’s disgusted with him, he’s still kind enough to ask if Castiel is alright, and it breaks his heart. It’ll break his heart even more when he tells Dean it’s over between them. If Dean doesn’t say it first. “I was young and wasted. It’s just embarrassing, but it’s fine.” *It’s not fine, Castiel. You can tell him it isn’t fine. Are you fucking kidding? Hell no. Doesn’t he know enough?* He feels Dean’s eyes on him as he finishes the patch and reinstall the skirting enough so it’ll hold until spring. “How are the cats?” he asks to distract him.

“No, I want to crawl in a hole and never come out. “Sure,” he answers. “I have to give Benny his tools anyway.” He smiles at Dean, a softer, fuzzier variation of his fake smile that seems to satisfy
him, and lets Dean kiss him on the cheek without flinching or vomiting from stress before following him inside. Castiel is pleased with himself for finally figuring out how to fool Dean.

“Thank you so much,” Mildred says to him when he comes inside.

“Of course,” he says, making sure to keep up the soft smile so Dean doesn’t get suspicious. He’s too smart sometimes and he’s seen too many of Castiel’s defense strategies. He checks the cats over and speaks to them. They seem to be content and mostly over the brief trauma. Precious even lets him scratch her ears. “Well, I’d best be going. The weather is getting worse, and I want to keep up with the snowblowing. Dean, we should probably cancel our movie day,” he says, careful to use cancel and not reschedule.

“Yeah, alright,” he says. “If you want.” He sounds disappointed, but Castiel’s not sure why. Probably because he doesn’t know the whole truth. If he did, he’d be disappointed in Castiel in a completely different way.

After saying goodbye to Mildred and Benny, he lets Dean drive him home because not doing so would raise suspicion. He lets Dean walk him to the door because it’s what they do. He lets Dean hug him because he’s weak. He lets Dean kiss him because it’s the last kiss they’ll ever share and he loves him — damn it, you fell in love with him! — and he knows he’s selfish but he needs him, just for one more second. He smiles when Dean says “See you later,” even if he knows he won’t. Dean waves to him, and Castiel waves back. Then he closes the door. He doesn’t lock it and he doesn’t set the alarm. It doesn’t matter anymore.

***

He hasn’t been able to reach Cas in three days.

There have been no return texts. No calls. No responses to his knocks. No movements from the house. No footpaths to the mailbox. The driveway has a foot of snow in it, plus extra from the asshole living on the other side of him. Sully whines every time they walk by, which has been often. Jess and Sam have tried, too, to no avail. He’s seriously thinking about contacting Gabe, though he’s not sure Cas would be too happy about that and he doesn’t want to freak Gabe out after all the trauma he’s already gone through. He thinks about calling the police, but worries about that going badly. He’s not sure how Cas feels about the police as a rule, whether he sees them as helpful or not. He doesn’t know if he ever tried to report the abuse and was ridiculed or not taken seriously.

Dean suspected at first that Cas might be touchy about the tattoo thing, but Cas said that it was just a “young and drunk” thing and he seemed fine; he didn’t try to run off or retreat into himself. He acted normal. So why the disappearing act? Why the whole thing just confuses him, and he’s hurt and worried. Mostly worried. He wonders if maybe he decided later that he was pissed at Benny for saying something, or at Dean for not defending him (again). So when Benny comes by in the late afternoon to drop off some movies he’d borrowed, Dean lets him have it.

“You had to say something about the tattoo, didn’t you? You couldn’t just leave well enough alone?” Dean shouts, his stress overriding his fear of conflict. “Now he’s not talking to me!”

“Brother, I’m sorry! I didn’t know he’d be so touchy about it!” Benny defends himself.

“He’s sensitive!”

“I get that, but shit, it was just guy talk, man!”
“Dude, I know, but damn it, you can’t just embarrass Cas. I know you don’t get it and it’s not my place to say, but shit, he… he’s been through a lot and you can’t… you just can’t.”

“Well, I didn’t know! Shit, Dean, he didn’t seem freaked out to me. He said it was a drunken thing he did with his college friends. He didn’t get all upset with me. He even laughed about it!”

Something about what Benny says makes Dean’s breath catch in his lungs, but it takes a few seconds for his brain to figure it out. “Wait. College friends? He said college friends? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, man. He said it was just a stupid, drunken night with his college buddies.”

Maybe he didn’t think it was possible, or maybe he didn’t want to believe it happened that way, or maybe he’s just that dumb, but Dean realizes with sickening clarity how Cas got that tattoo. “I gotta go, Benny,” he says, jamming his feet into his untied boots and not bothering with a coat. Sully barks at his heels and Dean ushers him out the door along with his friend. “I’ll call ya,” he yells before he breaks into a run. 

He never went to college. It was her. She did that to him.

He gets stuck a couple of times in his own days-old boot prints on the driveway and trips up the porch stairs, but he doesn’t care as he pounds on Cas’ door. “Cas! Sweetheart, please open the door! I know how it happened! Fuck, Cas, let me in, please!” He gets no response. Sully barks furiously and stands on his hind legs, whining to be let inside to check on his friend. “C’mon, I’m freezing out here, sweetheart,” he shouts. When that doesn’t work, he tries the doorknob in desperation, knowing full well that Cas always locks it. He nearly falls to the floor as the door yields and he stumbles inside. He takes the open door and unarmed alarm as bad signs.

“Cas?” he yells, peeking into each room. “Cas?” He searches the first floor with no success, then the previously-unseen finished basement, where his workout equipment is located. Not finding him, he checks the back door, but doesn’t see any tracks leading to the workshop. He checks the garage for good measure, but though his vehicle is there, he is not. Dean tromps up the steps, poking his head quickly into each room before he sees the only closed door: Cas’ bedroom door. He steps up quietly, Sully by his side, and knocks. No answer. Dread grips his gut with icy fingers. “Cas, please, it’s me,” he says. The sting of withheld tears burns his eyes and nose. “Cas. If this is about that tattoo, you don’t have to be embarrassed. It doesn’t matter to me.” He thinks he hears movement; relief floods his body and he has to support himself against the doorframe. “Cas, sweetheart.” There’s no other sound for a long time, but Dean waits anyway, ever hopeful. Sully whimpers and lays in front of the door with his head on his paws. Dean’s eyes catch the glint of the doorknob; it may be unlocked. He thinks about trying it but stops short, going for one last-ditch effort.

“Sweetheart, I’m not gonna open this door unless I don’t think you’re safe or well, okay? But I’m scared and I really need you to let me know you’re okay. And I really have to tell you something, but I don’t want to do it through a door. I need to see you. I need to look into those beautiful blue eyes and tell you something that’s been on my mind for a long time now, and you need to be looking at me when I say it. Please. Let me tell you this and let me see that you’re okay, then I’ll leave you alone if you want me to.”

He waits the longest three minutes of his life before a dim light appears under the crack of the door. He hears shuffling, then the turn of the knob. He backs away from the doorframe as the space opens to Cas, clad only in boxer briefs and looking disheveled and sad but alive. Sully immediately approaches him and sits by his side. Cas gives his head a perfunctory scratch.

“Sweetheart,” Dean says, voice cracking as he tries desperately to be strong for both of them. Cas
might need him.

“Dean,” Cas rasps, his voice hoarse from days of disuse and perhaps crying or… something. He wants to touch him, to hold him close and forever, but Cas isn’t reaching out to him. He’s standing, wobbling on his feet, and staring at him, waiting expectantly for whatever Dean has to say. So he says it.

“I love you, Cas. I’ve loved you for months. I love you. And I know that however you got that tattoo, you’re ashamed. But sweetheart, whatever happened to you, however it got there, I’m here and I’m not going anywhere. I don’t think badly of you because of that tattoo. It’s on your skin, but it’s not you. You are not what happened to you, and you are not your body. I love you.”

Cas sighs. “You shouldn’t—”

“Don’t tell me how to feel.” He smiles softly to take the edge off the admonishment. Cas’ lips turn up slightly before falling back into a frown.

“Is that all you wanted to say?”

“It’s not all I want to say,” Dean replies. “But I said I had to tell you one thing. That was the most important thing.”

Cas nods and swallows, his throat bobbing under three days of hair growth. “I think you should go now,” he whispers.

A single tear escapes and trails down Dean’s cheek. He licks his lips as he feels Cas slipping away from him. But something about his eyes, something about the way he stands there and waits for Dean to turn away, makes Dean remember something he learned from Sam about ambivalence. He takes another chance. “But do you also think I should stay?” he asks. “Is there a part of you that wants me to go and a part of you that wants me to stay?”

After an eternity, Cas closes his eyes and nods. Dean releases a quiet breath. “Which is bigger? The part that wants me to go or the part that wants me to stay?”

It’s another eternity before Cas bows his head and whispers, “Stay.” Dean nearly collapses in joy and grief until he adds, “But you can’t. I’m damaged. Broken.”

“I don’t care how broken you think you are. I don’t see you as broken. I love you.”

Cas opens the saddest, bluest eyes Dean’s ever seen and says, “I love you, too, Dean, but love can’t fix everything.”

He wants to dance and sing — Cas loves him! — but he bypasses that for the moment and says, “Love can’t fix everything, Cas, but it can keep us strong when making things better gets hard. It can give us happiness between the tough stuff. It can make everything worth it. And it’ll be there for us when we make it through all of this together.”

Hope flickers in his eyes before he shakes his head. “I can’t be what you need—”

“You already are what I need.”

Cas winces. “I can’t be. I’m a disgrace. Dirty. You saw how I was marked!”

“That tattoo doesn’t mean anything—”
“Yes! Yes, it does, Dean! It’s a permanent reminder to me and a warning to anyone who tries to come near me that I have already been used and claimed. It’s a brand!” he shouts, his agitation growing along with Dean’s confusion.

“Sweetheart, I don’t get what you mean. Reminder? Warning? I don’t underst—”

“I was raped!”

The words ring in the space between them. Dean’s mouth hangs open; he searches for a reply, but no words come because there are none. The tears, however, come freely and rapidly.

“I was sexually assaulted,” Cas continues quietly, averting his eyes, “and she had me tattooed after so I could never be with anyone ever again. She knew. She knew I would leave her someday, so she… she did this to me. She knew what it would do to me, and she was right. It broke me. How could I be with someone after that? After this?” He turns and shows Dean his back, pulling the briefs down a bit so he can see all of it for the first time. The ink runs down the bottom third of his spine, down to his coccyx. It’s poor quality, all shaky blue-black lines. Probably an amateur, Dean surmises. The image is a crudely-drawn penis pointing toward his ass, the head of it ending on his coccyx. “Cockslut” is scrawled down the center of the penis, which is the part that Dean and Benny saw. “Fuck me” is in graffiti-style writing at the highest point on the scrotum, mid-back, and “April’s bitch” is just above the cleft of his ass, below the cockhead. The tattoo turns Dean’s stomach — not because of the words or the image, though both are vile — but because of what it means to his boyfriend. His sweet Castiel was violated and he’s the one who feels shame. He’s the one who feels he needs to hide, who feels unlovable. It’s not fair, it’s not right, and he seethes with rage at the miserable excuse for a human who did this to him. But she hasn’t won, and she won’t. She thought she would ruin his life forever, that he’d never let anybody close and even if he did, that no one would want to be with him. She underestimated Castiel Novak and Dean Winchester.

Cas turns back to him, eyes downcast. Dean wipes his eyes and inches closer to Cas until their foreheads are touching. Cas exhales, long and low, and says, “This is why I can’t be a good boyfriend, Dean.”

“I still disagree.”

Cas lifts his eyes to Dean’s; he sees the corner of Cas’ mouth tick up slightly through his scruffy beard. “You are very stubborn. A glutton for punishment.”

“Glutton for you, like I told you already,” he smiles softly, sliding his hands into Cas’. He feels Cas’ fingers curl around them.

“I hate this. I hate that this is the end of everything,” Cas whispers, closing his eyes.

“What? Why? What do you mean?” Dean asks, panicked. He pulls back to look at his boyfriend.

“I can’t… I can’t. Even if you’re not disgusted by the tattoo, or the abuse, or the fact that someone else… and I couldn’t… I didn’t…” He licks his lips and exhales harshly. “Even if you could overlook everything, I can’t keep an erection, Dean. I’ve tried, and I can’t. All the shame gets in the way. I think of you and I try and it’s fine for a while, and then I… I can’t finish. I was used and now I’m damaged.”

Despite what he probably thinks the effect is, Cas’ words actually give him hope. “Sweetheart, no, this isn’t the end of everything. It’s the beginning.” Cas opens his eyes and Dean smiles, small and certain. “Listen, I’ve done a lot of reading and stuff about shame and… and I think this will really make sense, okay? You are… we are right where we need to be.” Cas’ forehead crinkles and Dean
squeezes his hands. “It’s like this. When people are ashamed or afraid, they’re vulnerable, right? So people can choose to either protect themselves or to be authentic. Every time you felt shame or fear before, what did you do? You would protect yourself by pretending not to. You’d try to be perfect, you’d try to please everyone or prove that you were fine. You put on a show. But the thing is, pretending just numbed you, you know? And when you’re numb, you can’t move, you can’t get any further in your healing. But when you’re authentic, you heal. So every time you were brave, and every time you let yourself connect with me or someone else, you started to feel better, right?”

Cas nods, so Dean knows he’s on the right track. “You stopped keeping things secret. You let others hear you, see you, know you? You let yourself feel. And every time, Cas, every time you did that, things got better, at least from what I can tell. You got less afraid of being touched, or having people around, that kind of stuff. We got closer. And now that everything’s out in the open…. “

Dean stops. “Is everything out in the open?”

“Yes,” Cas says. “The worst of it.” He pauses, thinking. “Oh, um, our sexual encounters at home were abusive, too, but you probably guessed that. So yes, I think that’s it.”

Dean tries not to flinch at Cas’ casual, dismissive revelation of The Bitch’s abuse of him during sex. He exhales, calm on the outside and heartsick on the inside, and continues, “Okay. Now that everything’s out, you can begin to heal. It’s the beginning of your new life, of our lives, our love. Everything. Right?”

Cas’ blue eyes pierce Dean’s soul, looking for something. Dean gazes steadily back, scared out of his mind, until Cas drops Dean’s hands and loops his arms around his neck. Dean chances wrapping his arms around Cas’ waist; he splays one hand over the middle of his back and the other directly over his tattoo. He waits for Cas to adjust; he stiffens only briefly before sighing and pulling Dean closer, leaning into him. Dean relaxes and relishes the warmth of his boyfriend’s bare skin under his fingers. They stay that way for some time. It reminds Dean of when they danced. He hums and holds him a little closer, nuzzling into his neck, until Cas grows heavy in his arms.

“Are you tired, sweetheart?” Dean asks in his ear. He nods, so Dean leads him to his bed and straightens the covers as he pulls them down. Sully, who’s been watching his people carefully and hasn’t left Cas’ side, jumps onto the bed and lies at Cas’ feet. Cas lies on his stomach, his tattoo in full view, and rests his head on his pillow (he has a pillow!?). Dean isn’t sure where he should go, where would be most comfortable for Cas right now, so he kneels on the floor by his side. Tentatively, he lets his hand glide over the tattoo, then over the rest of his back, left to right, up and down. He watches Cas’ face, but he is still. Several minutes go by, and Dean thinks he might have fallen asleep when Cas speaks.

“I don’t really remember it.”

He’s talking. He’s talking about it. “Do you remember any of it?”

Cas keeps his eyes closed and says, “I remember that we’d been in some sort of argument earlier in the day. She thought I was cheating again. But that night, when I came home from work, she apologized and said she wanted to make it up to me. She dragged me out to a bar and wanted me to drink with her. This was toward the end, so I really didn’t care anymore. I just did what she asked. I think she spiked my drink with something, because most of the rest of the night is a blur. I remember leaving and going to some guy’s house; I think he was a friend of hers or a boyfriend she had on the side or something. After that, I don’t remember much. I remember her voice and his, but I don’t know what they said. I remember pain, but I don’t know who or what caused it. I remember…” Dean feels his breath hitch under his palm. He continues to rub his back gently. “I remember just lying there, not fighting, not even saying no…” His voice and body stutter. “I didn’t even say no. I was trying to keep myself for… and yet I let them… I let myself be…”
Cas opens his eyes. They’re an intense, almost unreal shade of cerulean. But it’s not the color that draws Dean to his eyes, that makes him shift his body so he sits directly in front of Cas’ face, a hair’s breadth away. It’s the tears. In all the time he’s known him, he has seen him cry a handful of times, but never for himself. He’s always cried for the pain he believed he caused others. But now, the tears brimming in his eyes are for him. It’s a tipping point, Dean knows, and he needs Cas to understand, to tell himself the right message. He needs Cas to know. He cups a hand to his jaw.

“Cas, you didn’t ‘let’ anything happen. You were drugged, and even if you hadn’t been drugged, you were in an abusive relationship where you feared for your life, so even if you’d said yes it would’ve been under duress. And even if none of that was true, they didn’t ask and you didn’t say yes. You didn’t give consent. Period.” He inhales deeply, making sure he has Cas’ full attention, and says, “Sweetheart, you’re not dirty or bad. You were abused, and you were drugged and sexually assaulted, and you didn’t deserve any of it. Any of it.”

His tears wobble on the edge of his lids. “You really think… you really believe…”

“I know, Cas. I know it more than I’ve ever known anything in my entire life.”

Cas stares into his eyes as he lets one tear fall, then two. Dean blinks only when necessary, not allowing anything else to interfere with this moment. Two become four, and four become uncountable as Cas pours his shame from his eyes into his pillow, into his beard, onto Dean’s nose where their faces now touch. His breath catches between mournful wails, dying into soundlessness when they become too intense. Dean rests his face on Cas’ pillow and cries with him, aching for someone to please take this pain away from the man he loves even though feeling it is the best thing for him.

“I woke up the next morning at home, sore and tattooed,” Cas continues quietly once his tears stop and his breathing evens. He huffs and rolls from his stomach onto his side. “She forced me into sex so many times, Dean. It was all bad. But this one’s hard to take because I have no idea what actually happened and I never will.”

Dean feathers Cas’ hair through his fingers. “I love you, sweetheart. I’m so sorry that happened to you. All of it.”

“Me too.” He closes his eyes for a moment. “Fuck, I slept most of the last three days and I’m still so tired.” Dean refrains from telling Cas he hasn’t slept most of the last three days. He doesn’t need the extra guilt. “Will you sleep with me?”

“Sleep with you? You want me to stay?” Dean clarifies hopefully.

“Yeah. If you want.”

“Of course I want to, Cas. I always want to be with my boyfriend.” He pauses. “We are still boyfriends, right?”

Cas gives him a watery smile. “Dean, I’m fucked up, but I’m not crazy. If you wanna stay after all that, I’m keeping you.”

Dean laughs softly, scared to believe it but wanting it so desperately he doesn’t dare to say anything else. Instead, he surges toward his boyfriend and mashes his entire face into Cas’, Dean’s fresh tears commingling with Cas’ leftover ones as they breathe hotly together. Cas puckers his lips, landing a tentative kiss onto Dean’s lower lip; Dean shows him just how welcome the kiss is by kissing him back with fervor, making Cas huff a laugh into his mouth. He separates them and pats the space next to him. Dean toes off his boots and strips off his sweatshirt. At Cas’ nod, he pushes his jeans to the floor, too, then slips into bed, bumping Sully with his foot. Cas slides over
and snuggles into his side, urging Dean’s arms around him. Surprised but thrilled, Dean obliges and wraps him securely in his loving embrace. “Is this okay?” Dean asks. “Do you feel safe with me?”

“I feel safer in your arms than out of them,” Cas murmurs, adjusting slightly and sinking into him.

Dean lays his lips on Cas’ head, letting his relief and utter joy leak silently from his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

How are you? <3

*Warnings for the following:
Sexual abuse/assault
Physical abuse
Psychological abuse

The work about shame, protection, and authenticity that Dean references is by Brene Brown.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday! Have some love. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel wakes with a start from his nap, the feeling of being held down stirring him into a panic. He opens his eyes in the dimly-lit room to Dean and Sully watching him, their eyes as wide as his own. Taking a deep breath, he remembers why they’re here and what happened. He relaxes back into the mattress, tugging Dean toward him. Sully joins them, stepping on them both as he snuggles between his packmates. Castiel looks at Dean to get his attention and make some comment about the dog, but finds that Dean is already looking his way with soft green eyes. If he could touch the emotion in them, it would feel like cool, springy moss against his too-warm heart. “Hi, sweetheart,” he murmurs quietly, though they (and Sully) are the only ones there.

“Hello, dear heart,” Castiel responds. The two men prop themselves up on their elbows, facing each other above the dog’s furry body, and simply drink each other in for a while.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, sorry. Just an old response, I guess. I felt like I was being held down and… my body just reacted.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” Dean reaches a hand toward him and strokes his cheek. “I love you, Cas.”

He never thought he’d say it aloud to Dean — in fact, he’d hardly dared say the words in his own head, though that didn’t make them any less real. He just believed the thought, like many of his thoughts, would remain his secret. But he doesn’t have to keep secrets anymore. “I love you, Dean,” he says, the truth and freedom of it making his very breath flow easier through his body. Dean’s answering smile is all the light Castiel will ever need for the rest of his life. “What time is it?” he asks Dean because he doesn’t want to take his eyes off of him to glance at the clock.

“Ten. Guess we didn’t sleep through the night.”

“Not even close. What time was it when you got here?”

“Around suppertime, I think.”

“Not surprising, then. I’m wide awake now,” he comments with a pout.

“Me too,” Dean chuckles. “You hungry?”

“Considering I’ve eaten next to nothing the last few days, yes.”

“Dude, me too.” The thought of Dean worrying about him so much turns his hunger pangs to pangs of regret. Dean must notice the shadow cross over Castiel’s face, because he lifts his chin with a finger and says, “Hey. It’s okay. I was worried, but I understand and we’re moving forward.” He licks his lips. “We are, right?”
It’s Castiel’s turn to offer comfort. “Right,” he says, smoothing the creases in Dean’s forehead. A tremor of anxiety courses through him, and he hurries to add, “But you know it won’t be easy, right? I mean, I’m so happy we’re in love I can’t even explain… I never thought I’d have this. But I don’t think that’s going to solve my sexual dysfunction.”

“He, I know that, sweetheart,” he assures him. “We don’t have to have sex any time soon. Not ever, if you don’t want.”

“I do want,” Castiel insists. He grabs his hand and kisses each of his knuckles. “With you I do, believe me. When I’m alone I picture us together, making love, and I want it. I just… I’ve been trying to deal with the problem on my own, but it hasn’t worked so far.”

Dean nods. “Maybe Mia could help?”

He considers it. “Maybe. I haven’t talked much about that because I didn’t really care about it all that much until recently. Until you, I hadn’t even been interested in masturbation much and rarely became aroused. I find myself much more aroused these days,” he jokes.

“You and me both,” Dean says with a laugh, then stops suddenly. “Um, I mean, I didn’t mean that I just wanna fuck you. I just meant that I want you, too. I wanna make love, too, if we can. And if we can’t, that’s okay.”

*Always so careful with me,* Castiel thinks. He smiles at his boyfriend softly, caressing his cheek. “Thank you, dear heart.” He leans over Sully to kiss Dean lightly. “Food?”

“Yes,” Dean agrees enthusiastically.

“I still have all of the cookies I made for our movie night.”

“You do?” Dean’s brows perk up in interest.

“Yes,” Castiel laughs. “Pasta first, then cookies and a movie?”

“Sandwiches first? We can get to the cookies faster that way.”

“Allright, you win,” he teases. He flings the covers off and stands, realizing belatedly that he’s wearing next to nothing. He blushes self-consciously as he wanders to his dresser and pulls out two pairs of lounge pants and two t-shirts. Leaving the second pair of pants and the two t-shirts on top of the dresser, he slips his pants on, then catches a glimpse of his back in the full-length mirror when he accidentally bumps his deodorant to the floor and twists down to pick it up. He frowns. Sometimes he almost forgets it’s there, and other times he’s painfully, acutely aware of its presence. He must stare too long because Dean approaches him and grazes his hands along his hips.

“Heya, handsome,” Dean smiles. He gently lowers his chin onto Castiel’s shoulder and slinks his arms loosely around his waist, swaying them to whatever tune is in his head. Castiel allows himself to be lulled into relaxation. “Stay with me, okay?”

“Mmmhmm,” he hums. A sleepy, relieved love-drunkenness makes his head feel fuzzy; he pulls Dean’s face to his. “Are you sure you want this?”

Dean kisses him, slow and sweet. “Positive. Look.” He turns them sideways to the mirror so they can both see it. “See those feet? I want those feet. See those legs that always kick my ass when we run even though I’m taller?” Castiel rolls his eyes and smiles at Dean’s grin. “I want those legs. See all that?” He pulls away and traces a finger in the air from Castiel’s chest to his groin. “I want all of
it. See that back?” He runs the same finger along his spine, sending a shiver through him as he ends on the tattoo at his waistband. “I want that back. See that neck? I want that neck,” he says, nuzzling it and making Castiel giggle. He kisses his scruff, then his lips as he digs his fingers into Castiel’s hair and muses it. “This hair? I want this hair. And see that face?” he finishes, turning them back to the mirror since they became distracted. “I want that face. But what I want most is that soul you have in there.” He points to Castiel’s chest, then turns and looks into his eyes. “Yes, I want this. Trust me, okay?”

“I trust you,” Castiel says, eyes shining.

It takes the men ten minutes to get downstairs.

Sully at his side, Castiel makes sandwiches and hums to himself through kiss-swollen lips while Dean calls his brother to tell him where he is (with their dog). He peeks at the clock, then thinks about the movie or two they’re going to watch. He strides to the living room and interrupts their call. “Ask him if we can just bring Sully back in the morning,” he says. Dean must understand what Castiel is implying because he beams and, rather than ask, he just tells his brother that Sully is having a sleepover with them. Castiel returns to the kitchen, smiling as he thinks about waking up next to Dean tomorrow morning. He pulls the cookies from the fridge to let them come to room temperature, then finishes the sandwiches. He hears Dean in the living room setting up the TV. Castiel carries the plates of sandwiches and cookies in, warning Sully against eating anything, then pours drinks and returns to his boyfriend, who’s sprawled on the couch in Castiel’s clothes. He can’t resist pressing a peck to his lips.

It’s another ten minutes before they pull back and start the movie.

They both love *The Polar Express* even though it’s a kids’ movie, sort of. They follow it up with *Christmas with the Kranks* but have difficulty keeping their eyes open toward the end. When it finishes, Castiel checks the security alarm, sets it since it hadn’t been, and turns to Dean, who waits for him. He offers his hand and Dean takes it. He leads him upstairs, where they take turns in the bathroom, then to his bed, where they slide in next to each other, Dean following his lead. Sully burrows under the blankets and lies at their feet. After a brief kiss goodnight, Castiel turns off the light. A moment later, he turns it back on and flings the covers off.

“Everything okay, sweetheart?” Dean asks, curiosity and worry in his voice.

“Yes,” he replies, rummaging through the closet. “One second.” He returns to the bed having found what he was searching for. “Here,” he says, offering it out to Dean.

The soft, golden light in Dean’s eyes tells Castiel that he knows how hard this is for him, how much it means to do this. How much Castiel trusts him.

“Thanks, Cas,” he whispers, taking the pillow from his hands and plunking it down next to Castiel’s. He nods and climbs back into bed, then turns off the light.

“Can I hold you?” Dean asks in the dark.

“Sure,” Castiel answers, then pauses. “Actually, can I hold you?”

“Absolutely.” Dean is smiling. He can hear it. Castiel smiles, too, as Dean settles into his arms. He loves Dean taking care of him, but he feels so vulnerable after the emotional upheaval of the last few days that he needs to even things a little bit and take care of him. Dean seems to understand. He always seems to understand.
In the dark, Castiel’s mind wanders. He thinks about everything that’s led him to this point in his life, this ray of sunshine in his arms. Castiel waits until Dean’s body is heavy and his breathing is even before he whispers a broken “Please…” into the silence. He doesn’t know what he’s asking or who he’s asking — God, perhaps, though he hasn’t spoken to Him in a while — but he draws Dean closer and falls asleep with his face buried in Dean’s hair, joyful and frightened all at once.

“He knows,” Castiel shares with Mia the next morning. He sips his tea and eyes her over the edge of the cup.

“And you’re smiling,” she observes. He says nothing, instead peering into the cup self-consciously. The teabag sits heavily toward the bottom, the leaves weighing it down. Tea leaves, some people believe, are able to tell your fortune. He wonders what these leaves would say if he released them. He snaps to attention when she says, “You were worried about him knowing. Now he knows, and you sit here smiling.”

Her comment makes him smile wider. “I’m happy,” he answers.

“Tell me about that.”

“I… I have hope. He didn’t reject me when he saw the tattoo, or when I told him about the assault, or when I told him that I might not be able to have sex.”

“All those *what if*s made you afraid, but your fear ended up being unfounded.”

“Right.” He purses his lips, pouting at her playfully for being right. She smiles.

“How did you decide to tell him?”

“Uh, well…” he starts, then tells her the entire story, starting with the kittens and ending with that morning, when he woke up snuggling Dean and didn’t even startle. It was as wonderful to wake up next to him as he’d hoped. Telling the story aloud makes him realize something, though, and he frowns. “So it wasn’t really a choice I made, exactly,” he finishes.

“Your smile has disappeared.”

“I was just thinking about how I didn’t really do anything. It’s not like I sat him down and told him about it like a mature, well-adjusted adult. He found out by accident, and then I avoided him, and he had to seek me out and push me to talk about things. Maybe I haven’t made as much progress as I thought.”

“Alright, let’s review those thoughts you’re having. So yes, he found out by accident. Yes, you denied things at first and avoided him, and you needed some encouragement to talk. Lots of people handle conflict and uncomfortable situations the way you did. But did you let him in or did you let him stand at your bedroom door until he left?”

“I let him in.”

“And when he asked you about staying or leaving, what did you say?”

“I said the bigger part of me wanted him to stay.”

“Mmm. And did you tell him you love him?”

“Yes, but…”
“You told him.”

“Yes.”

“And did you tell him about the assault and your erectile difficulties?”

“Yes, but…”

“You told him.”

“Yes.”

“And did you carry through with your idea to break up with him?”

“No. We talked.”

“And did you invite him to stay?”

“Yes.”

“And you talked and you’re still together?”

“Yes.”

“See where I’m going with all this, Castiel?”

He smiles at her wry humor. Yes, he sees. “I had choices all along the way, and I made choices that brought me back to Dean, even if I sort of stumbled my way there.”

“Most of us stumble our way to change, Castiel. The point is that you got there.”

Castiel nods. “We hoped maybe you might be able to help me figure out my erectile problem.”

“I’m happy to help if I can. Is that something you want?”

A bare twig tapping on the window catches his attention. He turns to see a couple of cardinals, both males, perched on a nearby branch. Three other birds follow thereafter, a couple of female cardinals and a chickadee. He suspects they were snacking on the seeds at the feeder. These birds stay in Maine year-round, even in the bleak, hopeless winter, knowing that spring will eventually come. They stay and they make it work. “Very much,” he smiles, turning back to Mia. “I want my life back. All of it.”

***

Every time Dean thinks he can’t get happier, he proves himself wrong.

It’s Christmas morning.

A family dinner awaits.

He’s waking up next to his boyfriend.

And they’re in love.

“Morning, sweetheart,” Dean whispers. Cas slowly opens his baby blues and blinks at him sleepily. No startle or sudden alertness to his awakening this morning. He loves it.
“Good morning, dear heart,” he murmurs. Dean scoots closer and captures his mouth for a good morning kiss. Cas licks the seam of his lips, and any intention Dean had of keeping the kiss innocent flies away as Cas presses closer, surrounding him with the heat of his hands on his face. Dean opens his mouth, morning breath a quickly forgotten embarrassment when Cas hums appreciatively as he draws Dean’s tongue to his. God, he’s hot. Their arms wind around each other as the kiss deepens. Dean becomes aware of his raging hard-on; to avoid embarrassment on his part and any self-consciousness or feelings of failure on Cas’, he makes sure to keep their groins well out of contact (though he’d like nothing more than to make contact over… and over… and… not helping, Dean). One of Cas’ hands leaves his neck, where it was tangled with his other hand, and skims his jaw, then his neck, then his shoulder, until it rests on his pec, directly on top of his nipple. His thumb grazes over the nub, which he could set a golf ball on, Dean’s lust-addled mind thinks. Stay cool, Dean, he tells himself, it was probably just an accident, but a second swipe punches a moan from his lungs. The pressure of Cas’ mouth lifts momentarily; he opens his eyes to see Cas smiling, a glimmer in his eyes that instantly fills his cock even more. “Did you like that, dear heart? Is that okay to do?”

Dean wants to say something poetic, insightful, or comforting in this moment, something like Your touch sets my heart aflame or I know this is a big step for you and I appreciate and respect you and your choices and efforts or even I love you but what comes out is a breathless, high-pitched “Guh.”

Fuckin’ carrier pigeon is getting fired.

Cas chuckles darkly and circles his thumb around his nipple again. Dean’s breath catches in his throat. He should not be this turned on by something so simple, and yet between Cas’ expert caresses, his lively eyes, and his mischievous smile, Dean can’t deny that he’s more turned on than he’s been in a very long time. The feeling increases tenfold when his boyfriend’s delectable lips find his again; he kisses Dean slowly and deeply, continuing his attention on his nipple with one hand while smoothing his fingers up and down the back of Dean’s neck and into his hair with the other. Dean doesn’t know what to do with his free hand (the other being pinned under him as they lie on their sides), so he buries it in Cas’ freshly-trimmed locks and hangs on. Eventually Cas’ hand slips away from his chest and trails down to his hip, which he grips firmly. He wriggles his other arm from under Dean’s neck, then slides that hand to Dean’s neglected nipple and stimulates it as he moves his mouth to Dean’s chin, then his neck, then his collarbone, which is as far as they’ve ever gone. Dean’s heart and breath race as Cas sinks lower until he peeked up at him, chin on his chest. “May I?” he asks, the words hotter than they’ve ever been with Cas’ blue, blue eyes gazing at him and his warm breath skimming over his skin.

“Yeah,” Dean whispers before he can think properly. Cas always does that to him.

As Cas continues to roll one nipple in his fingers, a hot, wet pressure surrounds the other nipple, making Dean gasp. His hand slipped from Cas’ hair when he left his collarbone, and now it clutches the air as he wonders what the hell to do or what’ll happen next. He groans at a particularly dexterous flick of his boyfriend’s tongue — he can’t help it — and Cas looks up and smiles. “Shall I keep going?” he asks, looking down pointedly before flicking his eyes back up.

Dean wants to say Hell, yeah! but hesitates. He wants Cas; God, does he want him. Cas seems willing. But he wants to be able to touch Cas, too, and it’s probably too soon for that and he doesn’t want to push Cas into giving or receiving something that will make him uncomfortable. “We should probably stop before we get into a sticky situation,” Dean answers reluctantly.

A quick something flashes in Cas’ eyes before he shakes his head. “That was horrible,” Cas groans with a smirk, rolling out of bed.
Dean, still puzzling over what he saw or maybe didn’t see, realizes his double entendre and laughs. “That’s not what I meant!”

“Sure it isn’t,” Cas teases with a fond twist of his lips.

“I swear!”

“Uh huh,” Cas says, false disbelief in his voice. He ruffles his hair, then stretches. Dean can hardly keep his eyes off the man. Cas catches him ogling and smiles shyly before tossing a bathrobe onto his shoulders and heading to the bathroom.

After Cas disappears, Dean lies there for a few minutes and thinks of anything he can to will his erection away. *Fuck*, he wanted him to keep going, wanted to feel his tongue slide down his body and wrap around… *Once again, not helping, Dean.* He stands quickly —too quickly— and has to fling his arms out to steady himself. A warm hand wraps around his forearm. “Are you alright?”

“Ah. And I thought I was the one who left you all light-headed,” Cas tosses out jokingly.

“Okay, you did,” Dean tosses back without thinking, then flushes from his ears to his neck. “I mean —”

“Dean.” Cas slides his arms around Dean’s waist and presses closely; his cock feels soft against Dean’s painfully hard one. “We didn’t have to stop.”

“I know,” he says as casually as he can manage as he subtly shifts his groin away. He doesn’t want to tell Cas just how much he wanted him to continue or just how much he wanted to make Cas feel good, too, and he definitely doesn’t want to tell him how scared he is to do anything to hurt him or make him think of those horrible things. “S’all good, though. Gotta get breakfast goin’ before everyone gets up, anyway,” he says, reminding them both that Cas’ family is here.

“If you’re sure,” Cas says, examining him.

“I’m sure,” he says, kissing him lightly before mumbling something about having to piss like a racehorse. Cas rolls his eyes and wanders to the closet as Dean leaves the room, swallowing thickly.

Breakfast is lively. Cas’ brother and father are riots, as usual. Dean absently wonders if Cas was once this boisterous or if he’s always been quietly, understatedly humorous, as he is now. Cas’ mother forgot who Dean was when they came yesterday, but seems to remember him this morning (whether she spontaneously remembered or someone prompted her, he’s not sure). He reminds her of his motorcycle and promises to show her his equipment sometime. Cas leans into his ear and says he can’t wait to see Dean’s equipment. Dean blushes furiously (his boyfriend seems to have that effect on him) and thinks that maybe Cas has some of his brother’s and father’s humor after all.

After some time reminiscing about past Novak Christmases, they head to Sam and Jess’. Jess’ mother and stepfather are present, and Dean is nervous about having Cas meet them simply because they’re new to him. Cas wears his fake smile for a little while, but her mother’s warmth and stepfather’s admiration of and curiosity about his woodworking ease the way. Dean teases him when Jess whispers that her mother is “quite taken” with Cas. Gabe is the center of attention and
has Sam and all of the dads in stitches. Kali and Jess get along famously, while his mom seems to hold a soft spot for Cas’ mom. Cas appears more relaxed around Dean’s mother, perhaps because he feels like he has more support in the room. In turn, she seems more relaxed, too. Dean tells her that Cas insisted on having food that would be meaningful to them and honor their traditions, even if that food included meat or other animal-derived products. She is pleasantly surprised and even touched, Dean thinks. She tells Cas hesitantly that she was thinking of him when they brought a salad as their contribution to the meal. He thanks her, using a real smile and calling her Mary, and it makes Dean want to cry.

They exchange gifts but it doesn’t really matter, because Dean has already received everything he wanted this year.

After the hubbub of Christmas, Dean spends a quiet week with Cas, knowing it’ll be the last bit of extended time he’ll have with him for a while since he has to get back on the circuit for the new season. The Cup run in October was a test of sorts for him; he felt good, but not great. They had a hiatus after that, which was fantastic and just what he needed, but now he’s in good shape and he has to get back to work. He plans to spend as little time away as possible, flying back and forth when he can even though he hates it. Cas tells him to do what he has to do and not to worry about coming home if it doesn’t work with his schedule, but Dean can’t help the anxiety that pervades his thoughts. This thing is still so new between them. It’s not that he thinks Cas will leave him or fall out of love, and he knows for damn sure that he won’t leave Cas or fall out of love with him. He just worries about their developing intimacy and whether the time away will be good or bad. And of course, he chooses the night before he leaves, when Cas is leaving trails of fire along his neck, to worry the most.

“What’s wrong?” Cas asks against Dean’s skin. He glances up at him, his chin bumping his collarbone.

“Just gonna miss you,” Dean murmurs, not really knowing how to say everything that’s on his mind.

“I’ll miss you, too,” Cas confides. He scoots himself up to Dean’s face and locks their lips together. His kiss is hesitant yet needy; Dean cups his free hand around Cas’ jaw and pulls him in, drawing the hesitance out and replacing it with a desire that Cas answers in the curl of his tongue and the heat of his exhalation between them. Cas’ arm, wedged between Dean’s neck and pillow, bends up to knead through Dean’s sandy brown hair. His other arm, resting around his waist, leaves him cool as Cas pulls it away to plant his hand on Dean’s chest. “I’ll miss you so much,” Cas whispers into Dean’s mouth when they break for air. “But I want you to do what makes you happy. I always want you to be happy,” he shares quietly, as if it’s something too tender for Dean to know. Dean doesn’t have a chance to say anything as Cas dives into his mouth again, this time with no hesitance, then works back toward his ear, his neck, his shoulders, his chest. It’s so much and it feels so good that Dean nearly forgets himself as he feels his boyfriend’s hair tickle his chest and his hand skims from his pec to his hip, then skates over the band of his boxers. His brain comes online again when Cas licks into his navel, the sensation foreign enough to break the fog of arousal. He blinks his eyes open. Cas glances at him with raised brows, licking his lips nervously. His skin and his breath and his kisses are so warm. It would take nothing to sink into that warmth mindlessly and greedily, like burrowing under the covers on a rainy day. But he can’t be mindless. He rolls slightly to free his arm, then takes Cas’ hands and tugs him until they’re face to face again.

“I always want you to be happy, too,” he says before wrapping his arms around his sweetheart and cuddling him tightly. Cas sighs in the crook of his neck, burying his face. Dean sighs, too, soaking in every minute of Cas that he can. His engorged cock brushes against Cas’ pelvis accidentally; Dean moves back quickly, startling a frown out of his boyfriend. “Sorry,” Dean mutters.
“It’s fine,” Cas dismisses his apology. He clears his throat, then drags his t-shirt from the nightstand and sits up to put it on before turning off the light and settling back down on his side of the bed. Dean frowns minutely; he’d expected Cas to come back to him, but thinks maybe he wants some space after the encounter that perhaps got a little too hot and heavy for the man’s comfort. He knew he should’ve been more careful.

“Is it… can I… would you let me hold you?” Cas asks after a few awkward minutes lying in the dark together.

_Hmm. Maybe he doesn’t want space_, he thinks, though he isn’t sure why Cas is so hesitant to ask. “Yeah, of course, sweetheart. Please.”

Cas gathers the blankets around them, then feels his arms envelop him as they breathe in sync. The atmosphere is relaxed again. He feels safe and wanted and loved in Cas’ embrace. He can’t wait for the day when Cas will feel comfortable enough to share even more intimacy together. For now, he snuggles into his beloved, the man who wants him always to be happy, the man who doesn’t realize how much happiness he’s brought to Dean’s life.

Chapter End Notes

Moving into a new phase in their relationship... ;)

For those who have requested the recipes I reference in the chapters, I’ve included last chapter’s recipes below (last chapter was pretty heavy):

“I am frustrated and I need help,” Castiel grumbles by way of greeting. He claps his boots together on the doormat to dislodge the snow before collapsing in his usual spot, not even removing his coat.

“Alright,” Mia says calmly. She fiddles with her electric kettle, checking the water level and placing it back on its base after pouring Castiel a cup of chamomile tea. “For promoting calm,” she says with an arched brow as she hands him the steaming cup. Castiel smiles, squinting his eyes at her playfully, and places the cup on the end table, knowing it’s too hot and that it needs to steep for a few minutes. She smiles back kindly. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Castiel greets her sheepishly. “Sorry.”

“No need. It’s wonderful that you’re speaking up for what you need. So, Hurricane Castiel, what has you spinning?”

“Dean.”

“What about Dean?”

“He just… I don’t know what to make of his behavior.” When she peers at him with a tilt of her head, waiting, he continues, “I don’t know if maybe he’s disgusted by me.”

“Have you asked?”

“Most people aren’t going to tell you the truth about that, Mia.”

“Because most people are good.”

“Right.” He sighs, taking his cup of tea in hand, and closes his eyes. “He is good. He says he loves me. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t disgusted by my body.” He rests his head on the back of the chair. The warmth of the cup is grounding and comforting. He doesn’t drink yet, feeling his throat constricting. “He keeps putting me off and he… he hasn’t touched me since we talked a few days before Christmas, and it’s three weeks later and still nothing. He says he wants all of me, but other than hugging me or holding my hand, he hasn’t touched me anywhere below the shirt collar, you know?”

“And you want him to.”

“I do. I don’t know how much I can handle, but I do want him to touch me more than he is. But he doesn’t seem to want to. He just keeps his hands to himself, pretty much. And I want to touch him and do as much as I can for him to make him feel good, but he just…” Castiel trails off. He drags his hands down his face. “Ugh, this is embarrassing, but whatever, I’m just going to tell you. So when we’re together I kiss his chest, put my hands all over it, et cetera, and when I ask if I can keep going lower he finds some excuse for me not to even though he looks like he’s into it. And when
"I’m all over him, he pretty much just keeps his hands on my face or in my hair or clutched to his sides, like he can’t stand to do anything else. God forbid if his fully-clothed penis accidentally bumps into me. I swear he jumps a mile high. I mean, he tells me he loves me and he seems aroused, but he won’t touch me and he won’t let me go any further than I told you and I just… I don’t know what to do. I mean, it’s fine if he doesn’t want to, I just… this is so hard.”

“What has he said when you’ve expressed your concerns?”

“I haven’t said much,” Castiel admits.

“Why not?”

Castiel opens his eyes and takes a sip of his tea, now sufficiently cooled. “I guess I just thought that it would be obvious, at least on my part. I mean, I’m asking him if I can continue. I would think it was clear that I want to bl— uh, give him oral sex or, um, stimulate him manually. But he says no or avoids answering, so I just let it go. And I don’t want to make it even more awkward by asking him to touch me if he’s so turned off by my touching him, especially if he’s decided he’s disgusted by me. It puts him in an uncomfortable situation.”

“If he was disgusted with you, then why would he continue to kiss you or sleep with you?”

“I don’t know. Pity?” She arches her brow and Castiel sighs. “He wouldn’t, I guess.”

“So it’s possible that he’s not disgusted with you and that there’s some other reason why he’s hesitant to engage fully with you. What if you asked him to touch you?”

Castiel fingers the edge of his cup and thinks. “Well, he’d either say no or he’d say yes, right? And if he said no it wouldn’t be any different, and then I’d know for sure, and if he said yes then I’d get what I want. But then I worry too because what if I ask him to touch me and then he does and then I freak out? Or what if he does and I still can’t keep my erection and then we both feel like shit?”

“Maybe he’s worried about that, too.”

That gives Castiel pause. “Maybe.”

They sit in a thoughtful silence until Mia says, “You’ve been triggered before when you’ve been together. How did the two of you work those times out?”

“We talked through it.”

“And when times got tough and you both felt like shit?”

He flicks his eyes to her at the sound of the curse word. “We talked. Eventually.”

“Any reason to think the strategies that have worked in the past wouldn’t work for this?”

Knowing she’s right, Castiel heaves a large, exaggerated sigh and rolls his eyes like a petulant child. “Noooo,” he grumbles with a pout before smiling with good humor at his therapist. She laughs at his false grumpiness, but doesn’t let him off the hook.

“So what you’re telling me, Castiel, is that you have successfully used healthy strategies that have propelled your relationship in a positive direction, and that those strategies are still available for you to use if you so choose, even if they might be temporarily uncomfortable.”

“Nobody likes a smartass, Mia,” he jokes, startling a hearty laugh from her. He really does enjoy
her, even if she holds his feet to the fire. “Yes, yes, you’re right about all of it. I’ll talk to him. I just
needed to see if I was making the whole thing too big in my head.”

“You’re seeking intimacy again, Castiel. That’s huge. You’re bound to fall into some doubt. Just
try not to stay there.”

“You’re right. Thank you. And speaking of that… I’m still having a hard time with my erections —
no pun intended — when I try to, um, practice alone.”

“You’ve tried the things we discussed?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. But you do get aroused.”

“I do. I just have difficulty staying there. It’s weird. When I’m alone, it’s like I don’t have enough
stimulation or something. I’m relying just on my mind, and things pop into my head that I don’t
want. When I’m with him, I want him and… I’m aroused mentally, but I can’t seem to manage to
stay aroused physically. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, you know?”

“Well, given what you’ve told me about your experiences with April, that’s not surprising.”

“But I didn’t want to have sex with her. I want to have sex with Dean.”

“Yes, but between your lack of desire for her and the orgasm denial when you did become aroused
physically, I believe your body may have trained itself not to maintain an erection.”

He hadn’t thought of that. “Great,” Castiel moans. He takes a gulp of his tea and flops his head
onto the back of the chair again.

“Your body was trained out of erections and orgasms, Castiel. Is there any reason to believe you
can’t learn to have them again?”

“I guess not,” he sighs.

Mia watches him for a moment. She has that look of thoughtful determination he enjoys.
Sometimes, when he’s feeling low, it’s that determination that helps him get over whatever hurdle
he can’t seem to jump. “Castiel. Do you think you and Dean would be willing to try something?”

“I’m willing to try just about anything. Dean probably would, too, depending on how our
conversation goes.”

“Alright. I have an idea.”

After therapy and his stop at the hospital, Castiel waits with nervous anticipation for Dean, who’ll
be back in just a few hours and all his for the next forty-eight after that. Fortunately, he has the en
suite bathroom project to occupy him. He’s hanging the last of the drywall when the doorbell rings.
Frowning, he checks his phone. Dean’s flight won’t be in for another couple of hours. Who’s at his
doors? Old anxieties start to rear up. You’re safe. You can keep yourself safe. He trots down the
stairs and peeks through the peephole, surprised to see Benny through the lens. He hasn’t spoken to
him since the day of the tattoo incident. Should he let him in? He’s a good person. And you can
take him on if you need to. He opens the door.

“Hey, Cas,” Benny mumbles, his wool cap in his hand. “Mind if I come in? I wanted to talk to
you.”
“Sure,” Cas says with a small smile. He’s not angry with Benny, really. He just feels completely and utterly humiliated. “Coffee?”

“That’d be great,” Benny answers.

While he brews coffee for the two of them, they make small talk about how busy Benny is with his business and Andrea’s latest adventures in real estate (which is a much slower business in Maine in the winter, for obvious reasons). Handing Benny his coffee, he sits and waits.

“Cas, I want to apologize about the tattoo thing,” he starts.

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not fine. I didn’t mean nothin’ by it, but Dean told me you mighta been embarrassed and I shoulda thought of that. Tattoos are personal things, and I shouldn’ta just said the first thing that came to mind.”

Castiel can tell Benny is nervous — his Cajun accent is more pronounced. “It’s alright, Benny.”

“I feel bad for makin’ things awkward.”

“We can move past it,” Castiel says, surprised when it comes out of his mouth. In the past, he would’ve smiled politely and kept his distance, in his mind stamping UNSAFE on the man’s forehead with red ink. Now, he finds he wants to mend the relationship. Maybe he really is changing. He gives Benny a reassuring smile when Benny looks at him doubtfully. “Really.”

“Thanks, brother,” he smiles widely, extending his hand for Castiel to shake, which he does. “I’m real sorry for making things tough between us and between you and Dean.”

“It just brought a lot of things up,” Castiel explains. He planned to stop there, but he keeps going, remembering what Dean said about shame and authenticity. He exhales heavily and gazes at his folded hands, knowing he’s making himself extremely vulnerable. “The tattoo was given to me against my will at my wife’s direction. She was quite abusive.” There. He said it. He looks up to gauge Benny’s reaction, which is… sorrowful and angry and a little uncomfortable.

“That sucks, Cas. Shit, I don’t know what to say.” He rubs his mouth and trails his hand through his hair.

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“Naw, it’s just, shit. Can’t believe someone would do that to ya. You’re a nice guy, man.”

Castiel smiles. “Thank you, Benny. I appreciate that. Unfortunately, abuse can happen to anyone.”

They sit in silence until Benny asks, “You ever think of getting it covered up?”

Oh, he’d thought of it. Fantasized about having it eradicated from his body or covered by something beautiful. But the shame always engulfed him. “I don’t want anyone seeing it,” he explains quietly.

“Hey.” Castiel meets Benny’s eyes. “My gal Pam, who does all my tattoos, she’s real sweet and she does a lot of work with women… uh, people who’ve been abused. She’s seen it all. I think you could trust her. She keeps things real confidential.”

Castiel nods. “I’ll think about it.”
“You don’t gotta be ashamed, brother.”

*But you are. But you don’t have to be. You can take your body back.*

“Thank you. I will give it some serious thought.”

“Alright, brother. Hey, come on up for some gumbo this weekend. We’re havin’ the gang over.”

“Thank you, but Dean will be away at a race.”

“So? Come on up on your own.”

“Really?” Castiel asks incredulously.

“Yeah, really. You’re our friend too, Cas. You ain’t gotta have Dean with you to hang out with us.”

Castiel smiles, touched and grateful. “I will do that.”

“Great! Five o’clock on Saturday.”

They say their goodbyes, then Castiel gets back to work, smiling the whole time. He has friends. Family. A boyfriend who loves him. Work that fulfills him and a business that has the potential to blossom once again. Another chance at life. Who wouldn’t smile at that? The kind of warmth that always seems to radiate from Dean — soul sunshine, he’s come to call it — burns in his chest. It feels good to be warmed from the inside.

When Dean knocks, he’s ready. It might be hard to talk to him, might be hard to be so vulnerable and feel so broken, might be hard to have no control over whatever Dean will do or say, but he can do this. He can have his life back, no matter what he has to do to get it. *You are a fighter, Castiel. You are strong. You will overcome. You already have, many times over.* Dean, flushed pink from the January wind and smiling, waits for him when he opens the door. He accepts the hug Dean immediately wraps him in, holding him close despite the cold from the outdoors that clings to Dean’s clothes. He lets Dean get into the house and remove his outerwear, giving himself a few extra seconds to prepare. When Dean turns to him, Castiel opens his mouth and forces himself to speak before he loses his nerve.

“Dean,” he says, “we need to talk.”

***

Are there any words in the English language more dreaded than *we need to talk*? Dean doesn’t think so. He’d been in a great mood just seconds ago, happy to be off that cursed plane and happy to see the man he loves once again, even if just for a couple of days. Now, fear curdles in his gut. What did he do? Is the separation too much? Did Cas find someone else?

He doubts that he found someone else, realistically. But the separation, now that could be a problem. He knows it is for him. He hates it. And the separation feels even worse because the job itself now feels like something he *has* to do rather than something he *wants* to do. It has for a while, if he really thinks about it. Racing fed his mind, body, and soul when he was younger, but at nearly 30 years old it doesn’t feel right anymore. The travel is a drag. The practice is repetitive and hard on his body. The guys, great as they are, are mostly younger and immature. He doesn’t derive the same pleasure he used to. He’s changed. Frankly, his favorite part of the work now is mentoring some of the younger guys and talking with the fans, hearing their stories and how he’s made an impact on their lives somehow. He loves knowing that something he did helped someone else. Helping people is something he’s always loved doing. It’s what got him into trouble when he
was a young teenager, before he got into racing and screwed his head on straight. He fell in with the wrong crowd because he felt bad for them, felt they were just misunderstood. Your heart's too big, his mother used to tell him. It’s part of the reason she’s so protective. That big heart is pumping hard right now, wondering what the hell Cas wants to talk about. God, he hopes he hasn’t done anything wrong. He finds he can barely sit still as they plunk down on the barstools at the kitchen island.

“So, Mia and I have been talking…”

Oh God, he’s talking about me to his therapist. “Am I in trouble?” he tries to joke, though to his ears his joviality sounds unconvincing. Cas smiles.

“You’re not in trouble.”

“Is it the traveling? I can quit.”

“Dean, no, the traveling is fine.”

“So what is it?”

Cas frowns. “Wait, do you want to eat first? You must be starving.” He begins to stand. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking…”

Dean reaches a hand out to sit him back down. “I couldn’t eat right now if you paid me, Cas, are you fucking kidding? I feel like I’m gonna throw up.”

“Why? Are you sick?” He lays a hand across Dean’s forehead and feels his fingers and palms with the other. “You don’t feel sick, although your hands are clammy—”

“Cas, I’m not sick. What do you wanna talk about?”

Cas sighs. “Alright. Well, this is awkward and difficult for me to say…”

“Oh my God, I knew it was bad.” He presses his hands firmly into his face as if he can keep his fear and despondence inside him if he just holds on tightly enough.

“Dean, it’s not bad,” he says gently, removing Dean’s hands from his face and squeezing them in his. The familiar touch is comforting and he relaxes a fraction. “Or I don’t think it will be.” Cas sighs again. “Can we move to the couch?” Dean nods and they make their way to the living room, where they settle into the cushions. Cas holds one of his hands, which he hopes is a good sign. Or it could mean that Dean is going to need a lot of comforting when Cas breaks his heart in just a minute. Whichever. “Dean.”

“What?”

“You look pale, dear heart. Relax.” At the sound of his special moniker, he follows Cas’ command. “Alright. So I’ve been talking with Mia about my sexual issues… and ours, too.”

Dean’s brows wrinkle in confusion. “Ours?”

“Well, yes. Actually, that’s what I want to address first. And there’s no easy way to say this, so I’m just going to be straightforward.” Cas takes a deep breath while Dean holds his. “Do you want me sexually?”

What? “Cas, of course I do. I mean, that’s not all I want, but yeah.”
“It doesn’t feel like you do.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, still confused.

“You don’t touch me.”

“I tou—”

“Not below the collar, Dean. Not in a while. You haven’t touched my chest at all, and you haven’t touched my back since Christmas, pretty much, other than to hug me when we’re clothed. And it’s fine if you don’t want to, but just tell me. And when I touch you, you only let me go so far, which, again, is fine, but just tell me. I mean sometimes I’ll look at you and you have your eyes closed and your hands clenched like it’s torture.” His sweetheart’s eyes begin to water and Dean hates himself for it.

“Oh no, Cas, no,” Dean murmurs, pulling Cas into his arms. “No. I’m so sorry. Let me explain, okay?” Cas nods and Dean swallows the pain burning in his throat. “No. I want you so much, Cas. Too much, sometimes.” He separates them and cradles Cas’ face in his hands. “I’ve just been trying to be careful because I dunno what might trigger you. I didn’t want you to feel bad or get upset. You’ve been so great, Cas, doing so well that I didn’t wanna scare you. When you touch me I’m just trying to keep it together, you know? ‘Cause there’ve been times that I’ve been ready to go off like a fuckin’ bottle rocket. That stuff you’re talking about was me trying not to come in my pants, if I’m being honest.” Cas chuckles, which loosens Dean’s chest a bit, but then he grows serious again and it tightens right back up.

“You’ve stopped me even when I’ve asked if I could keep going.”

“I wasn’t sure if things were going too fast or if you felt like you were being pressured.”

“You didn’t trust me to be honest or to know my own limits. You decided for me.”

The truth of the statement is like a punch to the gut, leaving him both nauseous and breathless. He closes his eyes in shame. “You’re right. You’re so right. I’m so sorry.” He flings himself into Cas’ arms and rocks slowly back and forth, trying to comfort himself, Cas, or both.

“It’s okay, Dean—”

“It’s not okay.”

“Let me finish,” Cas demands gently. Dean looks up. “It’s okay because we’re talking and trying to figure this out. But we have to be honest, even if that means we’re going to hurt each other’s feelings or just feel… weird. So. Do you want me to touch you?”

“Fuck yes.”

“I’m sorry, can you be a little clearer?” Dean laughs at the smug uptick of Cas’ lips. Cas continues, “And you want to touch me?”

“Since I wasn’t clear before, oh fucking hell yes.”

“Okay, then,” Cas chuckles. “So instead of you assuming that I can’t handle it and me assuming that you find me disgusting—”

“Dude.”
“I know, I’m working on it,” he says with a wave of his hand. “So maybe, instead of assuming, we can just ask and talk. Even if it’s awkward. I mean, if I get freaked out, we can work through it, right?”

“Sweetheart,” Dean coos in response to Cas’ nervous countenance. He leans in and kisses him, sweetly but with no room for doubt. “Of course we will,” he whispers against his lips.

“Okay,” Cas responds before capturing his mouth with passion. It’s so hot and he wants Cas so badly. The kiss leads to another, and another, and soon they’re making out on the couch. Nodding his consent after Cas asks with his eyes and hands, his boyfriend unzips Dean’s hoodie, then starts to unbutton his flannel shirt. “You have so many damn layers,” he growls.

“It’s cold out,” Dean laughs. He asks, then disrobes Cas to the waist, letting his hands roam over his back and then his chest. Cas moans in response, which only excites Dean more and reminds him that it is definitely not cold in Cas’ arms. His skin is electric, the hum of his pleasure like distant thunder. Dean lets his fingertips just graze Cas’ nipples, sparking fire in the man’s eyes that pours out of his mouth and ignites the peaks and valleys of Dean’s face, neck, and chest. He moans at length, not silencing himself as before, wanting Cas to know how much pleasure he’s feeling. Dean’s desire for him is building, building, and he wants to pleasure Cas just as good as he’s getting. He tucks his feet under him and presses Cas into a prone position on the couch, hovering over him so he can get a good position for a very pleasurable exploration of his boyfriend’s upper half, but stops when Cas stiffens. He looks up and Cas shakes his head. Dean immediately removes his hands from his shoulders and sits back.

“Not… I can’t have you pinning me down,” Cas says weakly. Of course he can’t, you idiot.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, I—”

“It’s okay,” Cas says, sitting up and taking a shaky breath. “It’s fine. If whatever you had in mind can be done sitting up or on our sides, then that’s fine.”

Ah, so that’s why we’re always on our sides whenever we fool around in bed or on the couch. “Of course, whatever you need.”

“I’ll work my way up, I just—”

“I know. Whatever you need is fine.” He smiles and strokes a finger along Cas’ skin, from his ear to his navel. “Can I use my mouth on your chest?”

Cas smiles. “Yes. No teeth.”

“Got it.” He kisses his chapped lips, his rough stubble, the smooth, delicate skin along his clavicle. Then, stepping beyond the boundary he’d made but apparently hadn’t been needed, he glides his tongue over the work-salty taste of his chest, basking in the heady pleasure of indulging the man he loves. Cas leans into it, making Dean’s neck bend at an odd angle (though he won’t say a word to him about it) as he silently asks for more. Dean’s own pleasure is satisfied enough just by seeing Cas reveling in his, but is kicked up when his strong, nimble hands grip and tug his hair just how he likes it. He hums against Cas’ skin. Feeling thickness in his pants, he peeks at Cas’ but can’t tell what his current state is. He rests his hands on Cas’ hips as he lavishes both of his nipples with attention, one after the other. Cas trembles and moans before pulling Dean up and to his mouth, which he claims hungrily.

“Do you want me to take you further?” Cas asks when they part. His eyes skim down Dean’s body before returning to his face.
“Do you want to go further?”

“Yes. I want to take you as far as you want me to take you.” His eyes flash with heat.

Dean licks his lips, hot with desire for Cas but torn and needing to tread carefully. “That’s not what I meant. I meant do you want me to take you further, too?”

“Oh.” Cas’ eyes skim his body again, this time in thought rather than lust. They stop in his own lap. “I… not yet. I’m still working on, um… keeping it up.”

Dean tips Cas’ too-warm, too-pink face up to his. “Okay,” Dean whispers. “Why don’t we just keep it above the belt for now? There’s no rush.”

“I don’t mind, Dean. I want to.”

“I know, and I want you to eventually, believe me, but not yet. Today I just wanna get to know this body better.” He strokes a finger along Cas’ spine.

“Alright. But you’re missing out,” Cas says with a teasing lilt.

“I believe it,” Dean laughs. “Now, where were we?”

And though he may be missing out on some things, Dean knows he’s not missing out on the important things.
They spent their 48 hours doing what they usually do — cooking, working on Cas’ latest project, and now, making out every chance they got. When he had to leave, he made excuses to come back up the driveway several times, kissing his boyfriend each time, of course. It’s only been a short time they’ve been doing this, but it squeezes his heart more and more each time they part.

The night before his next race, he’s especially homesick (Cas-sick, actually, but he supposes they’re the same now) and calls Cas on Facetime. He feels marginally better after, the good feeling tempered by how horny he’s become. Cas had just taken a shower and was getting ready for bed (he felt bad then, remembering the time difference) and he looked fucking hot, even with the dim lighting. He sends him one last text:

To Cas 8:21pm: Sorry, I know it’s late there and we just talked but I miss you so much.

To Dean 8:22pm: I miss you, too. I’m just getting into bed.

To Cas 8:22pm: Wish I was there.

To Dean 8:23pm: Me too. Though I don’t think we’d be sleeping.

Dean groans.

To Cas 8:23pm: Not helping.

To Dean 8:23pm: Not helping what?

Dean fiddles with his phone, trying to think of a response, when it rings. “Hey,” he says to Cas. “I’m fine, I just…”

“Are you alone?”

“Oh, yeah.” Xavier is out — at the clubs, most likely. He doesn’t expect him back for hours.

“Can we try something?”

Dean’s face contorts in confusion, even though Cas called him without using video and thus can’t see it. “What do you mean?”

“I mean phone sex.”

Dean did not expect that. “Come again?” When Cas snorts, Dean groans and says, “I didn’t mean it like that. God, why do I always put my fuckin’ foot in my mouth around you?”

Cas is merciful and doesn’t comment on that, saying instead, “Mia suggested we try it. She said that perhaps I need the stimulation of your voice without the potential for… um, well, while I’m
still alone and in complete control of my own body. She suggested that my mind might need to get used to the idea a little at a time. I meant to talk to you about this before you left but I got distracted.” Dean knows Cas is probably smiling as much as Dean himself is, thinking about their mutual distraction. “Anyway, what do you think?”

“Yeah, I mean, sounds good to me,” he says enthusiastically. “Uh, you ever done this before?”

“No,” Cas chuckles, “but I can probably figure it out.”

“Yeah, I haven’t either, but you sound sexy reading recipes and instruction manuals, so…” Dean stops, the rest of his thought (I’ll get off really fast) hanging in the air unsaid. Cas laughs.

“Alright, then,” Cas murmurs, the low pitch vibrating his entire body like a car blasting a heavy bass beat. “So, any boundaries? Anything we shouldn’t say?”

“No for me. Well, don’t call me ‘Daddy’ or some shit.”

“Gross,” Cas says. An unmanly, squealing laugh escapes from Dean’s mouth. He can practically see Cas’ scrunched nose and offended frown. “For me, um, it’s probably pretty obvious — no humiliating names or behaviors or mentions of restraint or domination, things like that. Not that I think you would, but I just want to be clear.”

“Yeah, no, I’m not into humiliation,” Dean assures him, though he avoids commenting on the restraint/domination thing. He doesn’t like the heavy stuff, but a little power play is kind of fun when both parties are into it.

“Okay. So… what are you wearing, Dean?” Cas asks, his voice low but his tone humorous. “Sorry,” he laughs. Dean laughs, too. They both seem to feel a bit awkward, but at least they feel awkward together. Cas takes a deep breath, then exhales slowly. The static of it over the phone already has his dick paying attention. “I’ve been thinking of you.”

Dean scrambles to double-lock the hotel door because apparently they really are going to do this. He grabs his lube from his bag (there has been a lot of self-pleasuring since things have heated up between them), then he settles back into his pillows, rolling his shoulders. “Been thinking of you, too.”

“When I think of you, it’s usually about how your smile feels like sunshine on my face, or about how much you make me laugh, or how patient and loving you are with me.”

Dean doesn’t expect those words. His chest expands with helium balloons.

“But sometimes, I think of how firm your muscles feel under my hands, or how soft your skin is against my lips.”

Dean hums. He can relate.

“And sometimes I think about how well your thick cock would fill my mouth.”

Dean gasps. He really didn’t expect that, though he supposes he should’ve. It’s phone sex, after all. “Fuck,” he utters breathily.

“And when I think about how well your thick cock would fill my mouth, I think about touching myself. So I reach down and slide my bathrobe away — the same one I was wearing when we talked earlier, the same one I’m wearing right now — and I wrap my fingers around my cock, like I am right now.”
Oh, damn. Oh, fuck. He shimmies his boxers off, hurriedly squirts lube on his fingers (nearly dropping the bottle in his haste), and grabs ahold of his cock roughly, desperately, the ache both glorious and painful as Cas fills his mind with images of his pink lips around his dick. Of Cas’ hand on his own dick, like it is right now. He whines and strokes as he listens to Cas’ sinful voice.

“And as I’m pumping my cock, I imagine myself setting the same pace on your cock, pushing myself up and down your shaft, watching your face as I soak your cock with every pass of my tongue. Do you feel it, Dean?”

“Oh God, Cas,” he pants, stroking frantically as he imagines brown hair and blue eyes bobbing on his dick.

“Is your cock wet, Dean?”

“Yeah. Fuck, Cas.”

“I fuckin’ love sucking you off, Dean. Your cock fills my mouth so much I can’t fit it all. I have to use my hand to pump your cock harder.”

Dean’s head bounces off the wall when he lets it drop back too far. His brows pinch together and his mouth hangs open as he breathes shallowly. He feels himself floating, the balloons in his chest lifting him away into some kind of ecstatic oblivion powered by Cas’ sultry words and promise-filled pauses.

“I can hardly see straight, I’m so lost in you, lost on your cock. I imagine the hand around my cock is your hand, pumping me perfectly because you’re so damn perfect.”

Dean would argue the point, but he’s kind of busy. He moans, feeling his orgasm rising.

“Your fucking cock, Dean,” Cas hums. “Fuck my mouth, baby, go ahead. You can’t hurt me. You are perfect. Fuck it, baby, come on, I wanna hear you.”

Dean whines at Cas calling him baby, something so utterly unlike him that he knows Cas must be affected by this, too. Dean’s fist and his thoughts are a blur, both racing toward the inevitable finish as he cries out over and over until Cas growls a commanding, “Come in my mouth, Dean,” and he peaks, screaming and coating his hand and chest and even his chin as he folds over himself, the intensity too much for him to keep himself up. He lies there trembling, thrusting into the sheets through the aftershocks, until the balloons deflate and he descends into reality.

“Fuckin’ A, what the hell?” Dean asks dreamily, still gobsmacked that he had phone sex and an amazing orgasm with his boyfriend.

“Are you okay?” Cas asks, sounding amused and tinny through the speaker.

“Yeah, babe,” Dean murmurs, slipping into a new pet name for his love. “You are a fuckin’ phone sex god. Drop the woodworking shit and do that all your life. You’ll make a damn fortune.”

“I wouldn’t do that for anyone but you,” he says, sincerity lacing his words and wrapping around him like a warm hug. He smiles as he stares at the ceiling.

“I’ll pay you to do it for me, then. You’re officially on the payroll.”

“I think I’ll stick with the woodworking and provide phone sex to you for free. No uncomfortable conversation at dinner parties about my job that way,” he teases gently. “So you enjoyed it, then?”
“Did I enjoy it, geez, sweetheart,” he chuckles.

“Good.” Cas’ smiling voice across the line shoos away the last of his anxiety at being away from him. “I love you.”

“I love you,” Dean smiles giddily. He thumbs at the ejaculate on his chin. “Damn, shot so hard it landed on my face,” he laughs, Cas’ throaty laughter joining him. The whole thing is hilarious, really — the two of them finally able to orgasm together thousands of miles apart… Wait. Hold up. “Did you…?” he asks, not really wanting to finish that question because he’s pretty sure of the answer and feels like a total ass. Cas sounds reluctant to answer, which is confirmation enough. “Oh fuck, Cas, I’m sorry…”

“It’s okay, Dean. It still felt good.”

“I know, but we’re supposed to be working on your stuff—”

“Not just that,” Cas says with a hint of sharpness. “Our stuff, too, together. Even if I didn’t come, I needed to do this for you. I needed to be able to be intimate with you and make you feel good. Impotence is more than just not being able to get it up or keep it up. It’s powerlessness. I felt powerless throughout my marriage and throughout our sexual relationship until now. I needed to feel like I made a difference to you. Do you understand?”

The raw vulnerability and power in his words floods Dean’s eyes. “I get it. I’m sorry. I love you so much, sweetheart. You made me feel I was fuckin’ flying, man. Flying.”

“I’m glad.” The smile in his voice is back.

“But next time I’m gonna do better, though, okay? I’m gonna actually, you know, talk and try to get you flying too.”

“Trust me, dear heart, the view was great from where I was. I’m gonna go, but I love you. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Love you. Night.” He hangs up, cleans himself and tidies the room, then opens his laptop, his fingers floating over the keys as he does a little research, determined to help them figure things out so that they can fly together.

***

He’s almost there. So close. Close but no cigar, his father would say. Missed it by that much, Gabriel would say, imitating the guy in Get Smart. Sorry excuse for a man, his estranged wife would say before forcing some Viagra on him and taking what she wanted. Keep trying, his mind says.

For the next week and a half, he has phone sex with Dean every night. His schedule has precluded a visit, so they’ve had to make do. Dean has tried very hard, pulling out every sexy scenario and dirty but inoffensive thing he can think to say. (Dean told him he had to look some things up online to figure out how to perfect his phone sex script, which was pretty hilarious and rather resourceful, Castiel thought.) As hard as Dean’s tried, though, Castiel isn’t there yet. It’s not Dean’s fault, but he is taking it very personally. Dean doesn’t say so, but he can tell with every sigh, every silence, every half-hearted acknowledgement of Castiel’s assurance that he enjoyed himself anyway. He’s becoming discouraged, Castiel can tell, and it’s bummering him out. Part of him wants to throw up his hands and say I told you so! and just give up the ghost, but he knows he would hurt Dean by doing that — and he knows he would hurt himself, too. He loves him and he doesn’t want to give
him up. It’s a good feeling, even if he’s still getting used to believing he actually gets to have Dean. For now, anyway.

“It’s starting to feel like work,” Castiel complains to Mia. The impending snowstorm, enough for most people to cancel, was not enough to deter Castiel from keeping his appointment. Like him, Mia is an early bird, so she moved him to her earliest slot and now he sits in her office, green tea warming his hands. “I mean I know it’s work, but I mean it’s starting to feel like work instead of fun. And he doesn’t believe me.”

“He doesn’t believe you about what?”

“I tell him I enjoy it and he just… I don’t know. I think he thinks that if I don’t have an orgasm, he’s failed, and it’s just not true. I admit I’m frustrated as hell, but that’s not his fault and I really am getting pleasure out of what we do. I’m right on the cusp, Mia, I can feel it. There’s so much damn pressure, though, that I just can’t seem to break through.”

“You see the road signs telling you that you’re close and you’re enjoying the trip, yet you’re also feeling guilty and frustrated that you can’t get the car to go above 50 when you know Dean is waiting for you and you want to be there with him. Meanwhile, he feels guilty that he’s already there to enjoy the view and that he can’t do anything to make the drive go faster for you.”

“Right.”

“Hmm. So perhaps if both of you let go of the outcome, you could both enjoy it more.”

“That’s my hope. But like I said, he doesn’t seem to believe me.”

Mia taps a manicured finger against her teacup. “Speak to his fear, Castiel. That’s where the two of you are stuck. Ask him to trust you. The two of you have had that discussion before, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Most people are not swayed by logic until their emotional concerns are addressed.”

Castiel sighs. “Alright. Okay. I’ll give it a try.”

In the evening, Castiel eats a good meal and takes a hot shower, using the jets in the showerhead that pound on his neck and back. He’s sore from snowblowing and tense from the conversation he needs to have with Dean. He reclines against his headboard with a book until Dean calls him at 9:30.

“Hey, sweetheart!” Dean greets him. He sounds like he’s in a good mood. “Just kicked Xavier out and told him to make himself scarce for a while, so we’re good to go. I was reading—”

“Dean, hang on. We have to talk first.”

Castiel hears his boyfriend’s good mood fizzle. “Bout what?”

“What we’re doing isn’t working for me,” Castiel starts without preamble.

“Oh,” he replies after a moment of silence. The single syllable packs so much fear and sadness in it that it nearly bowls Castiel over. Realizing how Dean might’ve taken his blunt statement, he tries again.

“I didn’t mean us,” he says. Dean blows out a shaky breath. It’s frustrating not being able to
reassure him just through their touch. “Do you know that I wasn’t a hand-holder before you?”

“What?” Dean asks, befuddled by the strange tangent, no doubt.

“I didn’t like holding hands before you. Now I wish you were here so I could hold your hand. We always seem to communicate a little better that way. I miss you,” he sighs.

“Miss you, too, sweetheart,” Dean sighs in return. “Wish I was there to hold your hand, too.”

“It’s okay, dear heart.” He cradles the phone and swallows. “Anyway, what I wanted to say is that this phone sex thing between us has been amazing. Awesome. But I feel like you’re really upset that I’m not having orgasms.”

A drawn-out exhale fills his ear. “I am,” Dean admits.

“Why?”

“Because I want this to be good for you, too, Cas.”

“It is good for me. I tell you that, but you don’t believe me.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I’m not just saying that. Would you trust me not to lie to you, please? I know I’ve hidden my true feelings in the past to protect myself, but I’m working on that and I’m really trying to be open with you and it just doesn’t seem like it makes a difference. God, Dean, we’re on the phone. It would be easy to make a few noises and tell you I got off and you’d never be the wiser, but I’m not. I’m being honest. That’s not to hurt you. That’s just to tell you where I’m at. So if I’m not lying about that, why would I lie when I tell you that I really am enjoying what we’re doing?”

“Sorry,” Dean mumbles.

“I don’t need you to be sorry, I just need you to put some trust in me on this.” He pauses to let them both recover. “So, Mia suggested we make pleasure the goal instead of orgasm.”

Dean grunts. “That’s not solving the problem.”

“And I told you that problem may never be solved.” Silence settles on them like an itchy blanket. Dean stays quiet, so he continues. “Trust me, I’d love to have the kind of orgasms I used to have, but it hasn’t happened yet. I’ve come close, but there’s a lot of pressure, Dean. I’m trying to please you, and if I could wave a magic wand and fix this, I would.”

“You’re trying to please me,” Dean repeats, voice low and serious.

“Well yes, of course. Myself, too, obviously. But pleasure without orgasm is an admirable goal in its own right, and...” He stops when he hears Dean sniffle. “What’s wrong?”

“Trying to please me is pretending. It numbs you. And I did that to you. I feel like shit.”

Castiel’s forehead creases. “Dean, you didn’t do…”

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry.” He sniffles again between shallow breaths. His reaction seems too extreme for the situation, Castiel thinks. Castiel had simply wanted to suggest they change their focus, but now Dean seems intent on flogging himself. Quickly reviewing their previous conversations in his mind, something comes into sharp focus.
“Oh, Dean, do you think I’m trying to please you because I’m afraid of you?” When he hears a sharp, stuttered inhalation in response, he continues hurriedly, “Dear heart, I’m not afraid of you or trying to keep myself safe from you. I’m not trying to numb anything. I simply want you to be happy — not to placate you, but because I love seeing you happy. That’s all, I swear.”

Dean’s wet, raspy breath fills his ear, and now Castiel feels horrible for even bringing any of this up. You should’ve shut up and taken it. Castiel shakes his head to the thought. No. That isn’t how you’re going to live your life, and that’s not what this relationship is going to be.

“You swear you’re not scared of me?” Dean asks haltingly, interrupting his internal pep talk.

“I swear, love. I swear.”

Dean exhales shakily but seems relieved at Castiel’s assurance. “Okay. I’m sorry for making you feel pressured. I just feel guilty when you’re not getting there and I am.”

“Hey,” he says gently. “I haven’t reached the destination, but the sun’s in my face and the wind is in my hair. I’m enjoying the ride.”

Dean’s chuckling unfurls the anxious ball of yuck inside Castiel’s stomach. “Road trip analogy, nice.”

“Credit Mia on that one,” Castiel smiles, hoping Dean can hear it even if he can’t see it.

“Speaking of Mia, wanna tell me her plan?”

Castiel explains what they talked about and how they could put it into practice. Feeling loose and closer to Dean even after the difficult conversation, he puts the phone on speaker and opens his bathrobe. “So tell me what you like,” Castiel rumbles, then laughs when Dean sputters and cries that he thought Castiel wasn’t going to try to get him to come. “I just meant tell me how you like to be pleasured, that’s all. I need ideas for when I get you in my bed again.”

“Dude, you aren’t helping me not come. Your fucking voice, babe,” Dean whines, making Castiel laugh again.

“I never said you couldn’t, just that we aren’t making it the goal,” Castiel says. He settles into his covers to listen to his boyfriend as the wind whips the still-falling snow outside. He listens to Dean do the same on the other end of the line.

“Alright, well… you know I like having your hands in my hair… like it when you pull on it a little.”

“Mmm, I like doing that, too. Do it.”

“Tug on my hair?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Is the rule that we gotta do the stuff we talk about?”

“It’s not a rule…” Castiel muses. “But it might be fun.”

“Alright. But you gotta do it too.”

“Okay.”
Alright. Your turn.”

Castiel takes time to think. He hasn’t really thought much about what he likes in the last few years. “I’ve always been kind of sensual. So... I like light touches that give me chills.” He runs a calloused hand idly along his arm and chest, then with more purpose when his thumb catches on his nipple. He remembers the feeling of Dean’s fingers and hums on a sigh. “Mmm. Feels good, Dean.”

“Yeah? That’s good, sweetheart. Those light touches tickle me too much. I like a little pressure.”

“So when I touch you again, you want me to stroke you firmly, hmm?” Castiel says, his voice low and seductive — not on purpose, but because he’s relaxing into his own touch and the sound of Dean’s voice and image of Dean’s strong hands gliding over muscles and flesh. Mmm. He squirms into the mattress as he spreads his legs open, dancing his fingers over his freshly-shaved scrotum and perineum. He used to shave more often, loving how sensitive the area became when it was bare, but hasn’t shaved there since Balthazar. He didn’t realize how much he missed the sensation, even if it’s only his own fingers making him shiver.

“Cas?”

“Hmm?”

“What are you doing?”

When Castiel describes how he’s fondling himself, Dean moans in a way Castiel hasn’t quite heard from him before, a deep rumbling of longing. Dean is turned on, but not because of something Castiel is doing to him. Rather, he’s turned on by something Castiel is doing to himself. He’s turned on by his pleasure, he thinks… and that is definitely a turn-on for Castiel, both because Dean is so invested in his pleasure and because watching his partners pleasure themselves has always turned him on, too. “Do you like that?” he asks.

“God, Cas,” Dean whines. “I love that. Hearing you so relaxed and into it… do you know I said your name three times? Fuck, I’m so turned on right now.”

“Tell me about it,” Castiel whispers.

Three minutes later, Dean can’t even speak, and Castiel, though he doesn’t reach orgasm, feels wonderful in ways he’s not sure he can explain. Joy, courage, and sensuality buzz through his body; his nerves are lit up like a fast-motion traffic photograph and his brain is popping like the candy he ate as a youth, fizzy and sweet and making him laugh. “I love you, Dean,” he smiles. A happy, sated sigh and a barely-spoken “Love you” answers him.

What a ride.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Sometimes progress feels like one step forward and two steps back.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Talking is hard sometimes. Not talking is harder sometimes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few nights after Dean’s visit, it comes to him.

“I need to see him,” he whispers to himself.

Castiel has been enjoying their phone sex even more since their talk, and he’s been working on things on his own, too. It’s been good, but he’s a very sensual person — meaning that sex is best when all of his senses are in the mix. And there’s one sense that’s been conspicuously absent.

He doesn’t know why he didn’t think of it before. When he was dating and hooking up, he loved watching his partners strip, loved lacy or satiny underclothes, loved watching them ride him or suck him down, loved watching them get lost in their ecstasy. He hated closing his eyes during sex unless he got so overwhelmed that he had to. How could he have forgotten? He’s forgotten a lot, he supposes, having to suppress or deny his own pleasure, having to force himself to bend to the whim of another. But he remembers now.

He lights a few candles, preferring the shadows they cast over his sculpted form (he’s even started to gain a little pride in his body again, though thoughts of the tattoo quickly squelches it), and finds a picture of Dean in his phone. Taking out the lube he recently bought, he places it near him as he starts to glide over the smooth contours of his chest. His hand finds its way to his hair and he tugs tentatively, just enough to make his scalp tingle. It’s a delicious tingle, not the painful pull of someone just trying to get him where she wants him. He breathes through the quick trickle of panic and settles into the sensation. He used to like this. How did Dean put it that time at the hotel? *It was like you wanted me, like you were into it.* Yes. That’s how he used to think of it, too, when he thought of the bedroom (and the world in general) as a safe place. His hand leaves his hair and traces his lips as if Dean is touching them. Staring at green eyes lit by a perfect soul, Castiel allows his hand to wander to his penis. He caresses the velvety soft skin, blessedly unscarred despite what she did to it. He swallows against the memories and returns his focus to his sunshine, his love.

Smiling, he caresses his inner thighs, his scrotum, his penis, until the urge for the silky glide of lube makes him put down the phone and pick up the bottle. He gasps at the chill of it, enjoying the sensation against the heat of his skin. Picking up his phone again, he gazes at Dean as his hand sets a lazy pace. He lets his mind wander to unsexy thoughts for a moment, imagining how much faster firefighters could slide down their poles and get to emergencies if they used this sort of lube on them. Mmm, firefighters. Maybe Dean would like to become a firefighter when he’s done racing someday. Picturing Dean in the heavy jacket and blue uniform, the jacket slipping off his shoulders as he winds his way down the pole, and oh, there goes the uniform…

He calls Dean on Facetime, not caring about the late hour or that they already talked earlier or how wanton he looks. Dean answers with a questioning smile, but the smile immediately drops to a mouth-gaping shock. “Holy shit,” he murmurs.
“Need to see you, Dean,” Castiel confesses. “Need to watch you fall apart. Please.”

“Fuck, hang on, sweetheart.” He hears urgent mumbling, then the heavy thud of a hotel door. “Sorry. Had a few of the guys here shootin’ the shit.”

He hadn’t thought of that, since Dean had taken to getting his own room recently. “I’m sor—”

“Don’t you dare apologize. Fuck, you’re hot as hell right now.”

Castiel smiles timidly. “Dean, I need to see you. Is that okay? Can I watch you?”

Even in the dim light, he’s certain Dean’s eyes dilate. He licks his lips, in any case. “Yeah, sure.”

“I can give you a minute...”

“Noope,” he grins, whipping his t-shirt off his head and kicking off his basketball shorts in a matter of seconds. “Just seein’ you like this... fuck, Cas.” He fumbles with something off the screen that Castiel assumes is his bottle of lube. “Always want you so bad, Cas. Fuckin’ turning me on, starting without me and lookin’ like that.”

“Dean,” Castiel rasps, because his boyfriend has reminded him of another thing he used to be into: as much as he loved watching his partners, he also liked showing off for them a bit and seeing their reactions. “Dean. I want to watch you... watch me.”

“Uuuunnngh,” he moans, rolling his head down before meeting his gaze with lidded eyes. “Fuck. You know I’m not gonna be able to keep my hands off myself watchin’ you, right?”

“I’m kind of counting on it,” Castiel purrs. He turns on a small light so Dean can see him better, then licks and bites his lip, both nervous and excited as he prepares to put on a show. He bunches his blankets onto his outstretched legs until they’re tall enough to support his phone so that he can be hands-free at least part of the time. “I was thinking of you while I was touching myself, and I just had to see you. I tried your picture, but it wasn’t enough. I needed you.” Dean whimpers; his image shakes a little. Castiel knows what he’s doing. “I was thinking of you on a pole, in a firefighter uniform... and then the uniform came off and you were wearing this tight, sexy red underwear, getting yourself off against the pole. I just had to see you for myself, right then. Do you want to see how much I needed to see you?” At Dean’s high-pitched “yeah,” Castiel takes his phone in hand and pans from his face, down his chest, and down further, where he’s stripping his slippery cock. He can’t see him when his phone is pointed down, but he hears Dean’s breathy “oh fuck” and knows he’s made an impression. He smirks and raises the phone back to his face. “Told you, baby.”

“Cas, shit, fuck,” he breathes. He watches Dean for a minute as he struggles to keep his eyes open. “You can close them, dear heart.”

“And miss you? No way.”

“I should probably give you something to watch, then.” He props the phone up again, making sure Dean will get the full view, then strokes and fondles himself with his right hand while he grips his hair with his left. He watches Dean’s very favorable reaction. His skin is flushed and mottled, his breathing is getting faster, and he can’t stop licking his lips. He copies Castiel’s movements, somehow propping his own phone up and keeping his eyes pinned to Castiel. The power is intoxicating; a shiver of fear races through him at that realization, but his rational mind kicks in and tells him he is using his power for good.
Castiel continues on, his own pleasure revving up exponentially as he watches Dean’s do the same. He loves how he’s affecting him, is confident Dean wants him. He feels perfectly safe and desirable and whole and free and… “Oh God! Dean!” he shouts, then cries long, monosyllabic sounds of pleasure in between breaths. He arches his body and the phone slides down his legs and somewhere to his left, but he continues focusing on himself until he collapses on his back in blissed-out exhaustion. Catching his breath after a minute or so, he moves his heavy limbs until he hangs over the edge of the bed and sees his phone on the floor. He swipes it up on the second try, or maybe the fourth; he’s rather logy at the moment. He settles back into his folded pillows and says, “Dean?”

The screen moves until it reaches Dean’s handsome, equally blissed-out face. He looks at Castiel and breaks into happy, high-pitched giggles, covering his face with a hand to try to calm himself (or perhaps out of embarrassment). “Babe,” he says when he’s calmer. “Cas. Holy… babe.”

Castiel knows just what he means. He chuckles. “Yeah.”

“Fuck, man, that was…” He stops, lusty eyes yielding to the softer, loving glow he’s used to. “Sweetheart,” he smiles gently.

A soft smile alights on his own lips. “Dear heart.”

Dean’s gentle smile transforms into a swath of light across his face. “God, you’re beautiful. I love you so much,” he says.

“I love you, too.”

“How are you feeling?”

It’s almost laughable. He hasn’t had a genuine orgasm based in his own, chosen pleasure in over three years. How does he think he’s feeling? At the same time, though, Dean knows that this is something that Castiel has struggled with and why, and his sensitive boyfriend would probably know that it might bring up lots of other, unintended feelings. “Good. Fantastic. There were a couple of times that I got nervous, but just briefly.”

“That’s awesome, sweetheart.”

Castiel takes a deep, cleansing breath. “Yes, it is. Come home soon, Dean.”

“First flight out after the race, I’m on it. Promise.”

As if the dam has broken, Castiel has orgasms the rest of the week. He’s excited to see Dean on Sunday and perhaps, finally, have one together in person. He hears Mia’s voice in his head, warning him that change takes time, but dismisses it in his newfound optimism. Life is good. People are good. Everything is good.

Except for snow. Snow is not good.

Dean’s flight gets canceled due to bad weather throughout the Northeast. He rebooks and is canceled again. By the time he makes it home, it’s late Monday night and he’ll have to turn right back around and hop a flight on Wednesday morning. But though he’s been cranky about the delays, he has nothing but smiles for Castiel.

“Missed you, sweetheart,” he mumbles against Castiel’s lips when they meet at the door.

Both of them are excited to get to the bedroom, so they eat hurriedly and race each other upstairs.
Unfortunately, what they’re hoping for is not to be.

Everything starts well. They kiss and moan and sigh as they wind around each other. Dean strips his clothing off, baring the gorgeous expanse of his body to Castiel’s hungry eyes. He wants him, wants him so badly.

And yet when Dean moves to remove Castiel’s clothing, a tremor of anxiety races up his spine. He ignores it at first, though he moves Dean’s hands and gives him a seductive smile as he removes his pants. He hesitates at his boxer briefs, but upon seeing the desire in Dean’s eyes, slowly removes those, too. They lie on the bed, side by side, and Dean reaches for him. “Wait,” he whispers.

Dean shifts back a bit. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“Let me just… let me touch you first, if that’s okay?”

Sounding a bit confused, Dean agrees. Castiel can hardly blame him. He’s the one who bitched that Dean didn’t want to touch him. Now he’s trying to touch him and Castiel is holding him off. He feels horrible, but something in his gut doesn’t feel quite right.

Touching Dean is glorious. He rolls over and lies on his back against the pillows, so trusting and innocent. Castiel’s hands roam all over Dean’s body, getting to know the curves and planes after their time apart. They feel different with Dean on his back rather than on his side. He leans down and plants kisses along his jaw, neck, and chest, then around his hip and down his leg, coming around to the other side and repeating his motions. Dean is relaxed, pliant. His eyes have drooped closed. Castiel could do anything, anything at all to him, and he would be caught completely unaware. Like Castiel once was. He breathes shakily and continues his movements along his lover’s body. *Are you really lovers if you haven’t even made love, Castiel? When you can’t get it up when he’s right next to you?* He glances down and, indeed, he is flaccid. As if Dean reads his thoughts, he opens his eyes and looks down. “You alright, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” he smiles, ready to fake it. *No. No faking.* “Except this pesky thing,” he says, gesturing to his penis. Dean frowns sympathetically. “But I am enjoying touching you. It’s so much better to see your face in person,” he smiles again. “May I continue? I really want you to feel good.”

“Yeah,” Dean breathes. And so he does, caressing him with firm strokes and kisses until the man is putty and he comes for the first time in Castiel’s bed. Castiel watches as he erupts, undeniably turned on yet baffled as to why his cock isn’t responding.

“We probably just gotta get used to being in the same room,” Dean says optimistically afterward. “You want me to try again?” he asks, looking at Castiel’s groin — specifically, his stupid, limp dick.

Castiel shakes his head and slides his boxer briefs on. “It’s okay,” he says. He steps out of the bedroom and into the bathroom, wets a washcloth, and returns, wiping his boyfriend down lovingly. Dean gazes at him just as lovingly, although there’s a little less light in his eyes than usual. It makes Castiel sad to see it. He slides into bed and into Dean’s arms. “I missed you,” he says.

“I missed you,” Dean murmurs, kissing the top of his head. “Love you,” he says, kissing him again. The tender touches make his entire body relax, and he sinks into Dean’s chest, sighing. Dean briefly tightens his arms around him in a hug, then kisses his head again. Castiel settles into his love, his tender care, and hopes for a better tomorrow.
The next day, it doesn’t happen. Wednesday night, because he can’t bear to leave Cas that day like he’s supposed to, it doesn’t happen. Thursday morning, before he absolutely, positively needs to leave (“Dean, your flight leaves in two hours and you haven’t even gotten out of bed yet”), it doesn’t happen. It happens night after night when they’re apart, but when they get together again the following week, it still doesn’t happen, though they’re right back to it as soon as he leaves.

Dean’s starting to notice a pattern here.

He reminds himself that this is going to take time, that it might never happen. But he doesn’t understand why it’s not happening, because Cas is able to come just fine now when they’re on their calls (and God, he’s gorgeous when he’s like that). He won’t even let Dean touch him below the waist, which is confusing. He just wants to pleasure Cas like Cas pleases him. Cas says he feels desire for him, and the way he works Dean over, he believes him. So why can’t he get an erection when he’s with Dean?

While they’re at Sam and Jess’ place (technically still where Dean’s staying, too, though he hasn’t in some time), Dean sits with a glass of water, taking a break in the living room while Cas and Sam continue stripping wallpaper in an extra room, which he thinks will become the bedroom for the baby Dean suspects they’re expecting. He loses track of time as he lets his mind wander to what will happen tonight when they go to bed. Why isn’t this happening? Am I doing something wrong? What else can I do? When Jess sits with him and asks him why he’s blue, he can’t help but spill. He needs someone to talk to, and Jess always seems to understand (sometimes better than Sam). Dean confesses his feelings and concerns, hoping she’ll have some insight, advice, words of wisdom, anything he can use.

“I just don’t get it,” he whines quietly. “Everything’s so good, Jess. We love each other, I know we do, and we just… fit, you know? Except for this one thing.” When she arches a brow in question, he starts, “He can’t….” He sighs, not sure how else to say it except to say it plainly, so he finishes, “get an erection with me. Not in person.”

Jess, bless her, nods without judgment. “Why not?”

“I don’t know why not. I don’t know if he’s putting too much pressure on himself, or if I’m not doing something right, or what. I feel like such a failure.”

“Have you talked to him about it?”

“Not yet. I don’t want to make him feel bad.”

She nods in understanding. “Maybe he doesn’t like sex?”

“No, I don’t think that’s it. I mean, we have phone sex and he has erections then, and he even orgasms now. When we’re together in person, he seems to enjoy helping’ me out, you know? But he hasn’t been able to have more than, like, half an erection when we’re together. I’m kind of wonderin’ if he just gets off on what’s happening on screen, like porn, and not me in particular, you know?”

Jess shoots him a doubtful look. “Maybe, but that doesn’t really make sense, especially not if he’s enjoying ‘helping you out,’ as you said.”

“Yeah. I wanna touch him, wanna get him off too, you know? But… I can’t, ‘cause he’s not letting me touch him and he’s not getting hard. I dunno what to do.”
“Well, maybe you could start by telling me why the hell you’re talking to someone else about my dick,” Cas growls as he enters the room in stockinged feet. Dean never heard him coming down the hall. Dread makes him want to vomit and shit himself all at once. He opens his mouth to say something, anything, but he freezes. It probably wouldn’t have mattered, anyway, because Cas is furious and doesn’t give him much of a chance. “I cannot believe you are talking to someone else, someone I consider a friend, about how I can’t get it up!” he yells. “Don’t you think that maybe that should stay between us? Clearly not. How could you? I trusted you! Damn it, Dean!” Cas storms out of the room. Jess stands and pulls Dean along because he’s frozen in shame and fear. He knows he screwed up big time. Sam emerges as Cas is jamming his feet roughly into his boots, muttering and shaking his head. He looks at Dean, whose mouth is dry even though he feels the thin burn of bile fighting to escape his throat, and asks what’s going on.

“You want to know what’s going on, Sam?” Cas asks loudly. Sarcastically, he continues, “Why not? You might as well know, too. See, I can’t get it up when he comes home to see me. So Dean decided that it would be a good idea to tell your wife about my little problem, as if I wasn’t humiliated enough! So there, now you know, too.” He shrugs his coat on roughly as he reaches for the door.

Dean panics, fearing a repeat of the tattoo incident and thinking that it could be even worse because Cas is pissed as well as embarrassed. He’s never seen him so mad… which is actually very good, he realizes. Cas getting mad means he isn’t faking it. He’s feeling something, fighting back, defending himself. He wishes it wasn’t against him, but at least he’s expressing his feelings. It’s progress. Rather than keep the thought to himself, though, he opens his stupid mouth. “Listen, I know you’re pissed, but that’s good. I’m glad you’re tellin’ me how you feel. It’s really good for healing, moving forward…”

Eyes blazing, Cas turns to him and Dean immediately knows he should’ve kept his damn mouth shut. “Well thank you, Dr. Phil. Do not psychoanalyze me, Dean. I already have a therapist, thanks.”

“I’m sorry,” Dean says, desperately trying to make things right.

“Well, good for you. But it doesn’t erase things, does it?” With one last scathing look, Cas opens the door. Sully barks and whines by his side, and Cas gives him a gentle scratch behind the ears before he storms out, closing the door more carefully than he might have had Sully not been there. Dean stares at the door, wide-eyed, before running out in his sneakers and no coat in the early February night, Sully at his heels.

“Cas! Wait!”

“Why?” he shouts as he trudges through the snow without a glance in his direction. “Do you want me to stand here in the middle of the street while you tell all the neighbors about my erectile dysfunction? Wanna go ahead and tell them about my tattoo while you’re at it? Ooh, maybe they’d like to know how I let myself be assaulted repeatedly and did nothing about it!”

“Cas, no, I just…”

“You just what, Dean?” Cas turns on him furiously as they reach the foot of the driveway. “You just what?”

“I’m… I’m sorry, I am…”

“I’m sure you are, but I’m not sure why.” He turns his back to him and climbs the driveway, then unlocks the front door. Dean follows, feeling desperately that he has to try to keep Cas talking to
him or risk losing him.

“I shouldn’t’ve done it,” Dean tells him as Cas toes off his boots and tosses his coat carelessly on the floor.

Cas locks the door and sets the alarm, then shoulders past Dean toward the kitchen. “You’re damn right you shouldn’t’ve.” He grabs a glass of water and keeps his back to Dean as he drinks it in the middle of the kitchen.

“Can I just explain?”

“What’s there to explain? You were wrong.”

“You know, I had a good reason,” Dean argues, feeling his hackles rise even though he feels horrible for his betrayal of Cas’ trust… or maybe because of it. Sometimes, when he can’t avoid a conflict, Dean gets defensive so he doesn’t feel so bad.

Cas turns and faces his, arms crossed. “Oh, well then, please, share your good reason.”

“I’m scared, Cas, and worried, and I feel like shit and so fuckin’ helpless, like I keep failing you, and I didn’t want to dump all that on you!”

“Gee, you don’t think I feel all that, too? Scared, worried, shitty, helpless, like a fucking failure? Except here are the major differences, Dean: One, I’ve mentioned some of these things to you when we’ve talked, something you haven't done with me. Two, I have someone to talk to about that shit that we don’t have to socialize with every day, someone who has to keep my confidence, who can’t go home and tell her husband or whoever about the poor schmuck who can’t keep his dick hard when he’s in the same room with his man. And three, you’re not the one who has to worry that your ass is getting dumped because you can’t perform. You’re not the one who’s the problem. I am.”

Dean’s jaw clenches and his throat tightens. “It’s our problem.”

“Yeah, sure. When it comes down to it, though, it’s my problem. We have a problem because we both have to deal with this if we’re going to be together, and we have to talk and figure out alternatives and whatever other bullshit. But let’s face it, you could find someone else and function just fine sexually. I couldn’t. None of my dysfunction has anything to do with you. It’s all me, and it would be this way whether I was with you or someone else, because as long as someone else is touching me, I don’t have control.”

“Of course you do! You say the word and I stop, no questions asked, Cas!” Why doesn’t he trust me?

“But I don’t really, Dean. Because you could easily do all the things she did to me, and let me tell you, my words didn’t mean shit.”

“I wouldn’t do that! You know that!”

“Well, I thought you wouldn’t tell anyone about my erectile problem, but apparently I made too many assumptions and should’ve used my words, for all the good words do.” Cas storms upstairs and Dean follows, anger and terrible guilt powering his steps. Sully follows in his wake, keeping an eye on his people.

“Cas, please just listen…”
“I need to think. I’m going to bed and I need to be alone. If my words mean anything to you, you’ll respect that.” He slams the door in Dean’s face. Sully whines and scratches at it. He opens it again, lets Sully in, and slams it shut.

“You let him in,” Dean mutters to himself, pouting. “Where am I supposed to sleep?” he calls through the finely-crafted wood (Cas’ doing, of course).

“The guest bed, the couch, the floor… take your pick. Good night.” The light extinguishes under the door.

Dean grumbles as he troombs downstairs, turns off the lights, and trots back up and to the guest room. Though it’s dark out, it’s still early, the digital clock reading 7:15. Dean mulls over their argument, letting go of his anger as he concludes that Cas is right. He should’ve talked to Cas first, and he shouldn’t have told Jess so many details. He’d be embarrassed if the situation was reversed. He sinks into the pillows that don’t smell like them and thinks about how he can make it up to Cas. A while later, his phone buzzes on the bedside table.

To Dean 9:21pm: Everything okay?

To Jess 9:21pm: He’s still really mad. I’m in the guest room tonight.

To Dean 9:22pm: At least you’re still in the house.

It didn’t occur to him until that moment that Cas didn’t kick him out… that he locked and set the alarm behind Dean while they were fighting, as if he expected him to stay. He still feels safe with him, still trusts him. His eyes well up as he responds:

To Jess 9:22pm: Yeah. Maybe we’ll make it through this.

He hears Cas open his bedroom door and walk downstairs around 12:30, Sully’s feet clicking next to him. Dean quietly steps about halfway down the staircase and watches Cas dig out some hummus and chips. Dean hears the bag open a minute later in the living room and Cas quietly sharing a chip with the dog, teasing him not to tell his parents. Despite the shitty evening, Dean smiles a little at that. He wonders what he should do now. He sits on the steps and plays with his fingers.

“Are you coming down here or what?” Cas calls. Busted. He takes a deep breath and shuffles down the rest of the stairs and into the living room; at Cas’ open-handed invitation to take the seat next to him on the couch, Dean does so. They eat in silence for a while, Cas wordlessly handing Dean his glass of water to share.

“I’m sorry, Cas,” Dean says to break the silence. “I really am. I shouldn’t have told her all that.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. It’s a deeply personal problem to me. But I’m sorry for overreacting. I can’t expect that you won’t need someone to confide in besides me. I just wish you’d told me you were confiding in her.”

“I should’ve, and I’m sorry for that, too. Jess and I are really close, especially so because of all the shit Sam went through. When you and I met and I started to get to know you, I asked her about how I should handle things with you because I didn’t want to screw up. She’s been supportive and helpful and she doesn’t look badly on you at all. And she doesn’t even know all that much. She doesn’t know about the tattoo or the details of what you’ve been through.”

“Alright.” He sighs and offers Dean his hand, which Dean has never been so eager to take. “Can we keep discussion of my dick between us, please? Or at least between us and professionals?”
“Yeah, sweetheart,” Dean says, kissing his hand. “I’m so, so sorry. I should’ve talked to you.”

Cas nods and squeezes his hand. “We still need to talk about some things, but I don’t want to talk any more tonight. Let’s just go to bed and we can talk more in the morning.”

They clean up and walk upstairs toward the bedrooms. Dean stops in front of the guest room, worrying his lip between his teeth. Cas rolls his eyes and pulls on his arm. “You can come to our room,” he says, leading him, “but don’t expect me to put out.” Dean stares at the back of his head until Cas turns and smirks at him. Dean smiles as he lowers his face toward the floor. How easily Cas has forgiven him. He hardly deserves it, he thinks. They lie in bed together, Sully between them. They don’t kiss or hug, but Dean’s still pretty sure it’s going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Love to you all <3
Dean and Sully are gone when Castiel wakes up. He frowns until he hears movement downstairs and smells something cooking. Smiling, he slips socks on his feet and, after a quick stop at the bathroom, walks downstairs. Dean’s plump lips fall into a pout. “I was supposed to bring you breakfast in bed,” he complains.

“I’m perfectly capable of eating down here.”

“I know, but I was trying to do something nice for you.”

Castiel waves him off and sits. They eat quietly at first, both of them likely afraid to bring up the unpleasantness of yesterday and drag it into today. But Castiel doesn’t have much time with his boyfriend these days, and they’ll be with friends tonight for a belated birthday celebration for Dean. He just wants to get it over with.

“I’m still feeling hurt,” he starts. Dean nods contritely. “But I’ll get through it, because I know deep down that you aren’t April, that you talked with Jess to help yourself feel better and not to humiliate me purposely. That was not an uncommon thing for her to do.”

Dean pales and his bottom lip quivers. “I was trying to figure out how to make things better,” he murmurs, staring at his barely-touched food. “I swear I would never hurt you on purpose.”

“I believe you.” Castiel covers his hand with his own. Dean squeezes his eyes closed as he flips his hand over and wraps his fingers around Castiel’s. “I’m embarrassed, that’s all. Most men would be, I think, but it’s that feeling of not having any control over my body when I’ve made so much progress in other areas that I hate. It’s frustrating. I hate feeling afraid when I know I don’t have to. Mia said my body’s probably conditioned not to respond.”

Dean looks up. “Even with me? Someone you love and trust?” He shrinks back. “Hope you still love and trust.”

“I do, Dean.” He squeezes his hand reassuringly. “And yes, even with you. You probably want to know why.” Dean says nothing, but his knitted brows and curious expression say it all. He blows a hard breath out of puffed cheeks. “Alright.”

Castiel sips at his tea and mentally prepares himself to reveal the details of the sexual abuse he’d experienced. It had taken him a long time to call it that. Even if he knew intellectually that anyone could experience sexual abuse, it was hard for him emotionally to accept that he, as an adult male, was sexually abused by a woman. Sexist bullshit, he knew, but there it was. “You know about the rape I told you about, but you don’t really know the details of the day-to-day stuff.” He sighs. “Our sexual relationship was typical at first. When I wanted to leave the relationship, just before we got
married, I obviously didn’t want to have sex with her anymore. But we got married and I figured I had to try to make it work, and sex was part of that. She knew, though. She knew I didn’t really want it, and pretty soon it just became part of the abuse. She would wake me during the night for it. She would touch me when I didn’t want her to or use threats to force me to touch her. Eventually she began to be more aggressive.” He ruffles his hair with both hands, leaning into them. He feels Dean’s presence, warm and solid, and continues without looking at him. “She would yank too hard on my hair, hit me, whatever. She wouldn’t let me orgasm if I managed to get anywhere close to it. She’d bite me.” He cringes at having to tell Dean this—“bite me.” He hears Dean’s gasp and senses his body fold in on itself. He continues on quickly. “Sometimes she’d smack my balls until they bruised and swelled, or she’d bend and twist…. Um, anyway, I stopped having erections after a while, as you can imagine. So she forced Viagra on me.” He gulps his cooled tea, leaving one hand on his forehead. “The thing is, she didn’t do this all the time. I never knew when to expect it. That was probably the hardest thing. Intermittent reinforcement, Mia called it. She only did it sometimes, but I feared her all the time.”

Dean shifts next to him and lays his arm out next to Castiel’s, palm up. Castiel takes it. He doesn’t really need the comfort, but suspects that Dean needs to do something to feel like he’s helping, to not feel so powerless. Castiel can relate. “Between my talks with Mia and my own reflection, I really believe it’s that stuff and not the… other assault that is giving me the most difficulty in the bedroom with you. I can kind of put that rape in this little box, usually, like it’s in some sort of ‘other’ category that will never happen again. But everything with her… the kind of intimacy I should’ve experienced in my marriage was twisted into this ugly thing, and now intimate touch is something to be afraid of.”

He looks up and sees Dean’s eyes spilling over. He feels awful, but he knows Dean needed to know. He knows Dean needed to know. He had to be authentic. He turns and leans toward him. “You are not her. I know that. I know you love me and I know you wouldn’t hurt me on purpose. I believe that with my whole heart. That’s why I know that somehow, if you still want to do this, I will overcome this.” You will overcome. You already have. “Just telling you is a victory, Dean. Being able to have orgasms when I’m talking to you on video calls is a victory. Falling in love with you is a victory. Mia said that if I can be conditioned out of the erections and orgasms, I can be conditioned back into them. It’ll just take time and practice and… I don’t know. I guess I just have to keep trying. If you still want this.”

“I want you,” Dean says with passion. “And I want you to have everything you want in your life. So if you want me, and you want that kind of intimacy between us, I will work my ass off to make sure you know just how much you can trust me and how not her I am. I will do whatever it takes.”

“I know, dear heart,” Castiel says. “Just promise to talk to me, okay?” Dean nods. Castiel leans in and kisses Dean gently, thumbing away his leftover tears. “I want to exercise for a bit, then I have to do a little work today, and then I have to get ready for your party. You can exercise with me and help me work if you want.”

Dean agrees, and they finish eating. Dean insists on cleaning up, so Castiel gets dressed and waits for him. When he’s done, they take Sully for a quick walk because he likes to get outside no matter what the weather, then work with weights in his basement gym. They head to the workshop after, stopping along the way to toss some snowballs to Sully, who loves eating them. In the workshop, Dean is exceedingly helpful, handing him what he needs and trying to predict what he’ll need next. When he doesn’t need him, Dean cleans up after him. He leaves early and makes lunch, then insists on cleaning up after that and parks him in front of the television while he loads the dishwasher and does Castiel’s laundry. It’s odd. Dean is often helpful; he is certainly no slouch when it comes to pitching in. But his helpfulness has some sort of frenetic energy behind it that Castiel can’t quite figure out.
Later in the afternoon, Castiel readies the food for the party. His intention is to have Dean relax, since it’s his party, but he’s right in the thick of things. “You don’t have to help,” he informs him. “This is your party. You get to kick back.”

“I want to,” Dean insists, so Castiel leaves it.

They’re ready with just over an hour to spare. Castiel figures they’ll sit back and watch something on Netflix when Dean surprises him. “Can I give you a massage or would that be too much?”

“A massage? Why?”

“Because you deserve it.”

Castiel squints at him. “Why do I feel like it’s my birthday and not yours?”

“I just feel like doing something nice for you. You don’t have to lie down or anything, and I can face you if you want.”

He hasn’t had a massage in years. He’d thought about it a few times when the difficulties of his job sank into his weary muscles or when he longed for human touch, but he never dared. “Okay,” he agrees. They settle on the bed. He finds some lotion in his nightstand and tosses it to Dean, since he has no massage oil.

“Tell me if you’re uncomfortable,” Dean urges. Castiel never has to say a word, though, because Dean is so gentle and considerate. He stays in front of Castiel, first massaging his scalp and then his face. With lotioned hands, he moves down to his neck, then his shoulders and arms, stroking firmly enough for his muscles to twitch and relax. He smooths his hands down his pecs and abdomen, then applies more lotion to his hands. On his knees, he rests his head against Castiel’s shoulder as he glides his knuckles, then his fingertips, up and down his back, long strokes alternating with small circles. Castiel feels his head loll against Dean’s as he sinks into his boyfriend’s touch. He asks permission to massage his legs and Castiel grants it, slipping out of his jeans and then resting against the headboard. Dean smiles softly at him as he re-lotions and presses his fingers, strong from gripping handlebars to maneuver his motorcycle, into each tender muscle in Castiel’s thighs and calves. He’s surprised when Dean picks up one of his feet and starts stroking the arch.

“Dean, I haven’t taken a shower yet. I exercised and I worked in the shop and they’re probably gross,” Castiel mumbles as he tries to pull his foot away. Dean hangs on gently.

“I don’t care. Unless you really want me to stop.” He must sense that Castiel’s complaint was half-hearted, because he keeps going. It feels so good. Something else feels good, too, he notices. All this touching has his cock paying attention. Too bad it won’t stick around to play. He lets himself enjoy it while he can and doesn’t mention it to Dean, not wanting to set him up for disappointment. When Dean is finished the massage, he stands. “I’ll run the shower for you and meet you downstairs, sweetheart,” he says, then hands him his bathrobe and walks away.

Castiel hears the shower start. He’s relaxed and fuzzy, and he strokes his still-erect cock lazily over his boxer briefs. His interest grows, so he slides a hand into his underwear and pulls it out. He pictures himself on a phone call with Dean, watching him do just what Castiel’s doing. It’s so hot, and he’s so loose and it feels so good. He sighs, a small moan escaping his throat. He thumbs at the bead of warm liquid oozing from his fully erect cock, spreading it along his frenulum. Biting his lip, his eyes fly open to stare at himself when he notices something—someone—out of the corner of his eye.
Dean is standing in the doorway, clearly having been watching the show. His bulge is straining against his jeans. Wide-eyed and licking his lips, he puts his hands up in surrender and backs away from the door, though his gaze stays fixed on Castiel’s body. “Your, your shower…” he stutters breathlessly, “Didn’t hear you get in. I was just checking on you, I…um…”

“Stay,” Castiel commands him, his wrecked voice just barely above whisper. “Watch me.”

Dean’s throat bobs as he licks his lips again; he nods and sits in the doorway, jamming his hands under his legs. Castiel’s erection flagged only slightly at the interruption; it comes back to life as he resumes his movements. He locks eyes with Dean as he reaches for the lube, pours it on his cock, and jerks his hand rapidly. He watches Dean squirm in his place and delights in it for a moment before realizing how horrible that is. He would never deny Dean pleasure as long as they’re both safe. “You can touch yourself too, if you want.”

Dean strips his jeans and underwear in one hurried motion that catches his cock (a bit painfully, Castiel guesses) and makes it bounce back toward his abdomen. He sits back on the floor, not making any move to get closer to Castiel, and takes himself in hand. They stare at each other heatedly as they pleasure themselves together, just as they do on their video calls. As he watches Dean stroke his length firmly, Castiel glides teasingly along the length of his own with one hand and cups his smooth balls with his other hand to increase the sensation. Castiel feels safe and whole and free, once again, and his breath comes in rapid-fire puffs as his orgasm overtakes him. He hears Dean shout his name and opens his eyes just in time to see him at the height of his ecstasy. It’s like sunshine spilling into a darkened room.

“I do not deserve you, Cas,” Dean declares, his voice muddied by leftover bliss.

“It is I who doesn’t deserve you,” Castiel argues. He stands on shaky legs and walks to Dean, then helps him up. Holding both of Dean’s hands tightly, he draws him into an extended kiss. Their wet, spent cocks touch for the first time and they moan together. Castiel wants to cry with joy. “I love you,” he says.

“I love you, too. Damn, Cas,” Dean responds. He glances behind Castiel and jumps. “Uh, I’m happy to tell everyone to get the hell out, but people are gonna be here in, like, ten minutes.”

“Shit!” Castiel curses, giving Dean one last squeeze of his hands before running to what will likely be a very cold shower. But he’s warm inside, and that’s what matters.

***

It’s the damnedest thing.

Here Dean’s been trying to do nice things for Cas to make amends for his terrible mistake, and Cas goes and shares this amazing, vulnerable thing with him, giving him all the trust, forgiveness, and love he has without thinking twice. When he said he doesn’t deserve him, he wasn’t kidding.

Seeing Cas orgasm on video is a beautiful sight to behold, better than any sex scene he could ever watch on any screen. But seeing him orgasm in person… fuck. He can’t help the goofy smile that overtakes his face. He schools it quickly, though. He doesn’t deserve to smile just yet. Not until he truly makes up for what he did, an eye for an eye. And that will happen tonight.

Still, he can’t help but sing as he quickly cleans up in the bathroom connected to the master bedroom that he ducked into while Cas is in the main bath. “Pits, tits, and where I sits, doo dee da da, daaa,” he sings to himself with herky-jerky dance moves as he passes a soaped-up washcloth on the referenced areas. Deeming himself acceptable for his own damn party, he ducks back into their
room (their room, Cas called it last night, making Dean grin like a fool) and throws on a long-sleeved jersey shirt and a fresh pair of jeans from the clothes he keeps at Cas’ place. Well, Chuck’s place. He trots downstairs just as the doorbell rings, Sully already announcing the arrival like a furry herald. Dean opens the door to his brother and sister-in-law.

“Well hey, look! Our dog!” Sam says sarcastically to Jess, who laughs.

“Not our fault we’re more fun to hang out with, is it, Sulls?” Dean says in baby talk to the pooch, who’s excited to have his family together again. He sticks his tongue out at his brother, then takes their coats.

“Everything okay?” Sam murmurs. Jess listens intently for the answer. He can tell by the distress in her eyes that his sister-in-law feels bad.

“Yeah, we’re good.” Well, we will be after I apologize properly.

Cas approaches behind him and heads straight for Jess, immediately asking for permission to hug her, which she grants by falling teary-eyed into his arms. He can’t tell what they’re saying since they’re talking into each other’s hair, but knowing them both, they’re apologizing. Dean’s heart nearly explodes in his chest when he sees Cas hold her hand and kiss her cheek affectionately. The doorbell rings again, so Dean answers it and only catches a glimpse of his boyfriend and his brother talking and sharing hugs. Charlie arrives, followed by Benny and Andrea, Donna, and his parents, who are a surprise. He’s touched that Cas invited them and allowed them into his home, his safe space. It’s just another example of how forgiving, how genuinely good Cas is.

When the gang’s all there, the party begins in earnest. Everyone’s talking and having a great time, and Dean knows he should be happy. He is, and yet guilt dampens his enthusiasm. Cas seems happy enough, but he notices that he’s tucked his shirt in and belted his jeans, and he’s wearing a large zippered sweater besides that, and it breaks Dean’s heart. He has to be so conscious of himself at all times, even in his own space, and knowing that he violated Cas’ sacred trust… it kills him. At a lull in the conversation, Dean speaks up.

“So hey,” he says, knowing he’ll have everyone’s attention because he’s the guest of honor, “did I ever tell you guys about the time I went on a date with this girl and she made me try on her underwear and parade around her living room?” The group laughs, their laughter increasing when Dean tells them he liked it. “And, if you guys ever looked at me and Cas and wondered who’s bigger, I got two words for you: not me. He’s like a Magnum and I’m like a pea shooter. What’s worse is I’ve got a hair trigger.” Everyone titters and cackles except for his mom, who looks embarrassed for him, and Cas, who’s standing across the room looking confused and increasingly concerned. “And as long as I’m on a roll with my true confessions, here’s another embarrassing thing: I actually sleep with Cas’ t-shirt next to my face when I’m on the road because I miss him and I hate being alone.” A few deriding snorts from the men and awws from the women keep him going, though it’s getting more and more uncomfortable. “Sometimes I’m even afraid he’ll leave my stupid ass,” he admits quietly.

“Dean…” Cas says with concern as he approaches him, but Dean won’t stop. Not now. He raises his voice to continue speaking.

“And, in case you ever wanna hurt me, just blow me off any time I’m trying to be serious, ‘cause everyone expects me to just be ‘the happy one’ or ‘the goofy one’ and not have deep feelings or opinions about stuff. That shit really gets to me, but I’ll just smile and take it.”

“Dean, stop,” Cas says, almost in front of him now.
“And if you really wanna hit me below the belt, I’ll tell you about the time in Savannah when I—”

“Stop,” Cas demands, grabbing his face and forcing him to look at him. He shakes his head subtly. “No,” he says for only Dean to hear. “I know what you’re doing and I don’t want this.”

“Cas, I—”

“No. Come here a minute.” Cas drags him away from the confused onlookers. He hears them whispering as they leave, but his focus is on Cas, who turns toward him with fury. “My forgiveness was freely given. You do not need to do penance, understand?”

“I do, Cas.”

“You do not, you stubborn, beautiful man.” Cas cups his face warmly in his large yet gentle hands. “What you were trying to do hurts me, Dean. It hurts me to see you do that to yourself.”

“It hurt me to hurt you,” Dean starts to explain, but Cas won’t hear it.

“What happened wasn’t out of spite. It was a mistake.”

“But you’ve basically just let me off the hook for it.”

“Someone has to take you off the hook you insist on hanging from.” At Dean’s confused frown, Cas smiles. “I couldn’t do anything more than you’re already doing to yourself, and I don’t want to. We talked, we apologized, and I’m quite confident it won’t happen again. That’s all I need.”

Dean nods, not quite convinced but not wanting to hurt Cas, either. He slides his arms around him in a hug that Cas returns with a sigh. “This is hard stuff we’re doing, okay? We’re going to stumble sometimes, because fucked up people are going to have fucked up things happen between them and sometimes they’ll fuck up trying to fix them,” Cas murmurs into Dean’s neck, then plants a kiss there. Dean laughs and holds him tighter, an arm around his waist and the other around his shoulders. When they return to the party, no one mentions the odd turn of events, and the party resumes as if nothing had happened. Dean, however, feels like he can enjoy it now, and Cas stays close by, offering reassuring touches and verbal boosts to Dean’s ego.

When the night ends, the men crawl into bed and hold each other.

In the morning, knowing they’ll have to part again in just a few hours, the men hope to build upon the success of the evening before. Cas freezes when Dean even moves to touch him below the waist, though, and even being on his back seems difficult for him, so Dean moves across the room without a word and they enjoy each other from afar. When they’re finished, Cas repeats his actions from last evening and helps him up, holding his hands tightly as he kisses him passionately and they meld from their chests to their thighs. Dean is desperate to understand what’s going on, but Cas doesn’t seem any more certain that Dean is. When he pulls back, tears cling to Cas’ dark lashes.

“Sweetheart, it’s okay,” Dean says.

“I don’t want to keep having sex with you on video or across the damn room. This used to be so easy for me.”

“I know, sweetheart, but you’re working on it. We can make this work. You can’t just jump right back into things immediately.”

“I hardly think anything we’ve done would be defined as ‘jumping right back into things.’ I’ve
been slower than molasses."

“You have not. You’ve been cautious. I know if it was me, I’d be cautious, too.”

“You’re so understanding,” Cas says against his skin. He looks up. “It’s so damn irrational. If you’re touching me above the waist, I love it. If we’re sleeping together, I love it. If I’m touching you, I definitely love that.” He grins and Dean can’t help but grin back, his belly fluttering like laundry on a windy day. “It’s like if I give you too much control, I can’t do it.”

“You could tie me up if you want,” Dean jokes. Cas scoffs and jostles him back lightly before backing off altogether. “What? I’m serious! Oh, wait, is that a thing? Did I make this bad?” he asks, cringing.

“No. She didn’t do that. She didn’t have to.” With a sad smile, Cas leaves to shower. Dean watches after him for a moment, the tattoo glaringly dark against his winter-pale skin, and curses The Bitch to hell after a slow, painful death.

Dean cleans up, then dresses. A text message catches his eye:

From Benny 8:47am: Kittens are ready to leave mama. Think Cas would want one?

Dean smiles. How absolutely perfect, he thinks.

From Dean 8:58am: We’ll be over soon to check them out.

Dean hovers outside the bedroom door, then bursts in as soon as Cas opens the door after dressing. “Dude, we’re getting you a kitten,” he says. “Come on. We’re gonna go see them.”

“What? No. Dean, you know I can’t—”

“The hell you can’t. This is another way to take your life back, sweetheart. The more control you feel over your own life and the more you live it the way you want to, the better you’ll be.”

“I didn’t protect Apollo, Dean.”

“We talked about that. You forgive others so easily, Cas. How about you forgive yourself?” When he says nothing, Dean continues, “This is your opportunity to give a good life to another animal. They’re not gonna have a better life than what you give ‘em, Cas. I know it. Apollo was hurt by someone else’s hands. You would never hurt an animal. I know you.”

“But—”

“Cas, you’re the guy who’s vegan. You’re the guy who says blessings for animals who have died so people can eat them or wear them or just because they were killed on the road. You’re the guy who catches spiders in the house and releases them outside. You’re the guy who saved a starling, you’re the guy who left a dangerous situation to protect Apollo, and you’re the guy who Sully trusts, and who Precious trusted with her babies. When Sam scared us awake that time, you threw your arms out to protect me and Sull. You won’t let any harm come to your pet. I know it.

“And besides, you’re not in the same situation you were. You’re stronger, healthier, and you’re never gonna be in an abusive relationship ever again, so you’re never gonna expose your pet to that.”

“How do you know that?”
Dean recoils, hurt. “You still think I would do that to you?”

For a moment, Cas looks confused, until his face clears up and he says, “No. I mean how do you know I’ll never be in another abusive relationship? If you leave, it could happen.”

Dean’s hurt gives way to soft understanding. “I don’t plan to go anywhere. Not unless you kick me out. You’re…” Dean pauses, but there’s no point in hiding it, not anymore. “You’re it for me, Cas.”

Cas looks dumbstruck. He knows it was risky to say, knows Cas might not feel the same, but he deserves the truth. “I… you… oh, Dean. You deserve more.”

“You’re my more,” Dean smiles, remembering Cas introducing him that way to Gabe.

Castiel shakes his head slowly before yanking Dean into one of the most passionate kisses they’ve ever shared, a kiss so overwhelming that stars explode behind his eyes. Hot breath washes over him when they part, and somehow the stardust from the explosion landed in Cas’ irises. He’s the most gorgeous human being he’s ever known, inside and out.

“Let’s go get you a kitten,” Dean says, holding out his hand.

Cas shakes his head but takes his hand, a small, hopeful, trusting smile tickling his lips. Yes, he is definitely the most gorgeous human being Dean’s ever had the privilege to know and love.

Chapter End Notes

*Warning for descriptions of sexual abuse, including coercion, drugging, orgasm denial, and physical assault.

So many things happening next chapter! :D
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Hang on to your hats — there's lots packed into this chapter (all good). :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Mia, this is Cleo,” Castiel introduces. “And Cleo, look, this is Mia! She’s a lovely person who we don’t scratch with our super-sharp clawsies, okay?” He nuzzles his face into Cleo’s fluff and kisses her loudly and repeatedly.

“Aww, hi, Cleo! Aren’t you sweet!” She fusses over the kitten. “Cute name,” she says to Castiel.

“I’m grateful I won that one. Dean wanted to name her Catsiel.” Mia laughs boisterously, having to put her cup down so her tea doesn’t spill. Castiel grins and offers Cleo a tiny bite of a chicken-flavored treat for her good behavior.

“I’ll assume Miss Cleo isn’t a vegan.”

“No, that’s very bad for cats. She eats meat. I would never harm her like that.”

“I know you wouldn’t. I’m glad you know, too,” Mia smiles with both fondness and regard. “So, how did she come into your life?”

“This is one of the kittens I brought out from under the porch.”

“Ah. I thought perhaps that was the case. However, I’m more curious about how you allowed another pet into your life. You swore to me once that you would never do that again.”

“I probably also swore I’d never let anyone close again, never have a relationship again, and so on,” he says with a wry twist of his lips.

“Touché,” she winks with a wry smile of her own. “And how long has Miss Cleo been a part of your life?”

“A week. Dean talked me into it. I had to check with Chuck first, to make sure he didn’t mind a cat in his house, but he was very positive about it.”

“Mmm. You’ve grieved Apollo and accepted that you have a lot of love to give another animal, as well as the ability to protect it.”

Castiel chuckles. Mia always cuts past the bullshit. “Yes. Dean says I need to forgive myself for what happened with Apollo, and I’m trying. I’m trusting myself more and more, and like Dean said, I’m not in an abusive relationship, so I don’t think any harm will come to her.” She mews a plaintive kitten sound that instantly brings Castiel’s attention back to her. “What, baby? Oh, gonna bite on my finger, huh? Oh, you’re so tough, look at you!” He playfully ruffles the gray kitten as he provides his finger to chew on, then turns his attention back to his therapist. “I have something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Alright.”
“Um, okay, well… I had a reaction that I’m really concerned about, and I need to check it out with you.” She nods and waits, her silence an invitation to elaborate. He takes a deep breath and releases it. Even though she’s a professional and, frankly, has heard just about every intimate detail of his life, it’s still a bit embarrassing to talk about the specifics of his sex life. “It’s… okay, so sex with Dean has been both wonderful and frustrating, as you know. We’re doing well over video and I’ve been able to bring him to orgasm in person, which was great, but I still haven’t been able to let him touch me below the waist. But, uh, at one point during our last visit he caught me masturbating. I asked him to stay where he was, and we were both able to bring ourselves to orgasm. I thought that would be the breakthrough, you know? I finally had an orgasm with him in the room… well, in the doorway. And afterwards, I held his hands and kissed him, and our penises touched and it was like, finally. But when we tried again, I couldn’t unless he was far away from me.” He takes three deep breaths as she’d taught him to do, bringing in needed oxygen and resetting his vagus nerve. “He said something. It was flippant, but he said… he said, ‘You could tie me up if you want.’ My first reaction was to dismiss it as foolish, but then I… I thought about it, and the more I thought about it the more aroused I felt.” He looks at Mia’s open, nonjudgmental face and finishes, “I actually thought about restraining him. How sick am I? Why would I think that? Please tell me you have some logical explanation.”

Mia sits quietly for a moment, sipping her tea and gazing at Castiel. He’s not sure what she’s thinking, but he knows there’s a method to what she’s doing. “You tell me,” she finally says. “That’s what I’m paying you for,” Castiel grumbles, but sits back with Cleo and thinks. Not coming up with anything, he looks back at her with a pleading expression.

“I think you know the answer, Castiel. Take out the judgmental statement about being ‘sick’ and focus on what needs your partner’s restraint would meet for you.” After a long pause and a shake of his head, Mia prompts, “Why did Dean suggest that in the first place?”

“Because I said if I give him too much control, I can’t seem to perform.”

“So think about what needs are met when you have control.”

“Ohhhhhhh,” he breathes after a long pause, finally understanding. “Safety.” When she nods, he continues, “So my brain thinks that if he can’t touch me there, he can’t hurt me like she did, and I’m safe. That’s why it works when he’s on video or across the room, because he’s too far to hurt me. Being restrained would do the same thing. He wouldn’t be able to hurt me.” He straightens up in his seat on the worn couch that matches his favorite chair, setting Cleo beside him on a throw blanket. “And, I’d be able to come to orgasm because he couldn’t stop me like she used to. Well, shit.”

“Do you still feel like making the same judgment on yourself?”

“No,” he says with a shake of his head. “No, because I’m not looking to hurt him, I’m just looking to protect myself. Fuck, I thought I was turning into her.” He blinks back the tears that are prickling his eyes, ones that seem to be much more present than they ever were before. “But I don’t want to restrain him. I want him to be able to touch me. How can he do that? I’m stuck with the same problem.”

The room falls silent as they both think. “You said something that caught my attention,” she says eventually. “You said that when you were finished, you held his hands and kissed him and you were able to allow your body to make contact with his.” Castiel nods. “That felt good? No fear?”

“Really good. No fear.”
“Hmm. Okay. I have something I’d like you to try.”

Castiel leaves Mia’s office feeling light as air. Hopeful. Ready.

He stops at Charlie’s to drop Cleo off for an hour or two, much to her delight, then goes to the hospital for cuddle time with three babies. As much as he gets fulfilling human contact from Dean and others now, he still cherishes his time with the babies. Lately, he’s felt like he has something more to give.

Heading back home and hoping that Dean has arrived from the airport, he starts when he sees two vehicles in the driveway — Dean’s and Chuck’s. He’d told Chuck that he was ready to do the master bedroom, and Chuck said he’d be in touch. Dean must’ve seen Chuck’s car in the driveway and assumed Castiel was home, so he went there instead of Sam’s. Shrugging and not afraid of the spontaneous visit like he might’ve been in the past, he stops at Charlie’s to pick Cleo up, then pulls into the garage and heads inside. Dean and Chuck are sharing a couple of beers left over from Dean’s party. They smile when Castiel enters the living room with the kitten.

“Cleo! Hi, baby girl!” Dean squeals, his hands outstretched.

“Hi to you, too,” Castiel says drolly, amusement and love filling his heart as Dean takes the kitten from him.

“Oh, hey, you’re here, too!” Dean teases, then pulls him in for a long kiss. “Missed you,” he says quietly.

“Missed you,” Castiel says, kissing his nose before his boyfriend eagerly sits with their adopted fluffball. “Hi Chuck,” he smiles, turning his attention to his boss, who’s become his friend along the way. They embrace, then sit, making pleasant chit chat until Chuck takes a deep breath.

“The house looks fantastic, Castiel, as all your stuff does.” He accepts the compliment with a quiet smile. “Just the bedroom to go, eh?”

“Yes. I’m excited to hear your ideas.”

“I want to know how you would do it.”

“Of course you do,” he laughs. He knew he would. Castiel has essentially renovated this house to his own taste, as per Chuck’s request. It’s always struck him as a little odd — Chuck has different themes for his homes, and though he loves Castiel’s ideas and trusts him implicitly, he always has at least an idea of what he wants. Not so with this house. But Chuck is nothing if not eccentric, so he’s chalked up his behavior to that and has done as he’s asked throughout the project. He describes his ideas for the bedroom and shows him a couple of design boards, both featuring the perfect mirror he found during his road trip with Dean. Chuck asks him which one he prefers, and he rolls his eyes but answers honestly. He asks Dean’s opinion as well, and Dean chooses the same one, which is gratifying to Castiel. He’d been thinking of the man when he designed it. Chuck, predictably, chooses the one Castiel and Dean both preferred.

“Good,” Chuck smiles. “Now that that’s settled, I have a gift for you.” He pulls out a sheaf of papers and hands it to Castiel. It contains, among other things, the deed to the home with a sticky note on it, indicating a time, date, and location. His gut leaps. He can’t possibly mean…

“What is this?”

Chuck smiles warmly and leans forward. “This was my sister Amara’s home,” Chuck explains. “She was the best sister. We were very close. When she fell in love, I was so happy for her. She got
married and everything was great. But things didn’t stay great.” His breath puffs out of his nose. “He was violent, abusive. She tried to make the marriage work but he wouldn’t change. I begged her to leave him but she always said it was too dangerous. Eventually, though, she did, and I bought this place for her. This was her new beginning.” He smiles sadly, his eyes miles away. “You remember how rough this place was, don’t you? My sister always loved a challenge, and she was going to make this house beautiful, she told me. She had life in her eyes again. She was so excited. But she never got to live here.” His eyes close. Castiel and Dean, sitting side by side, watch solemnly, respectfully, as the man before them works the words out of his mouth. “He found her at the campground she was staying at while she worked on the place — she was having the floors refinished, and as soon as those were done she was going to move the cheap furniture she bought into the house and move in. She was so excited to have her own stuff. But he found her first and he killed her, then himself.”

Castiel’s breath catches in his throat. He knows how easily Amara could have been him. Dean must know what he’s thinking, because Dean’s hand finds his and they link their fingers. “I’m so sorry,” Castiel manages.

“Thank you. It was a while ago, but… well. Anyway, when we started working together I felt you were special, Castiel, and when you branched off to do your own thing I followed you because I was impressed by your work and by you as a person. When we met to discuss some projects, though, I knew something was wrong, and I knew it was because of the woman sitting next to you. Instinct, I guess. When you called to give me my money back, I figured something was up and I just had to meet up with you. You didn’t tell me much, but you told me enough.

“I’d put off doing anything with this house because I wasn’t sure what to do. I didn’t want to just let it go, but I didn’t want to live here, either. This was meant to be hers. It hit me like lightning then. I just knew this had to be yours.” Chuck opens his eyes and gazes at Castiel softly, almost paternally. “This house was made for second chances. New life. It had to be yours.”

Blinking away tears, Castiel approaches Chuck and embraces him. They each know what this generous gesture means to the other, and they let that knowledge speak for them rather than saying the words aloud. When they part, Chuck pats him on the shoulder and stands.

“My girlfriend is waiting for me, so I’m going to get out of your hair. I’ll be back for the signing” —he gestures to the sticky note— “and maybe the four of us can get dinner then. I’ve got some other projects and referrals to talk to you about.” They embrace again, then Chuck hugs Dean before slipping on his coat. “You two are good together,” he smiles. “Enjoy your new home, Castiel. You deserve it.” He slips on his gloves and waves before heading out the door. Castiel watches him until his tail lights disappear down the road.

“I’ve never owned my own home,” Castiel admits quietly to Dean, whose arm is wrapped across his back. Dean leans his head against Castiel’s shoulder. “I hate that it happened this way, but I’m… I’m so grateful for his generosity. For second chances.” He turns and loops his arms around his neck. “Especially second chances,” he murmurs before pressing his lips tenderly to Dean’s. His boyfriend rocks them in place, swaying to their heartbeats and the silence of the house.

“I know it’s like one in the afternoon, but I could use a nap,” Dean says, rolling his forehead against Castiel’s shoulder.

“Me too. It’s been an emotional day already,” Castiel agrees. He parts from Dean and scoops Cleo from her little bed on the living room floor. “Let’s go.” He meets Dean at the stairs and they climb them together, then take the turn into the bedroom that Castiel will use for only a short time longer. They strip to underwear and slide under the covers, Dean holding one arm out for Castiel to
snuggle into and using the other to wrap around Cleo on top of the covers. Castiel isn’t surprised that the kitten takes to Dean immediately. All cats love to sleep in the sunshine.

“My Valentine’s Day gift for you is gonna seem really crappy next to this whole house thing,” Dean jokes as he snuggles closer, already half-asleep. “Chuck outdid me.”

“He outdid me, too. I’d say he covered Valentine’s Day quite nicely for both of us,” Castiel smiles. He feels Dean shift ever-so-slightly and opens his eyes to an intense, scrutinizing, green-eyed stare. “What?”

“What do you mean, ‘both of us’?”

“You and me, of course. Oh, and Cleo. The house is her Valentine’s Day gift, too. Though she’ll probably like the new toys she’s getting much better.” He gives Cleo’s fur an affectionate rub, then meets Dean’s eyes again, which are just as intense and searching.

“Are you saying the house is for me, too? Like, you want me to live here?”

Castiel licks his lips, feeling anxious all of a sudden. “Well, yes. I thought… you told me I was it for you. Did I misunderstand?”

He’s not sure what he expected, but it isn’t Dean bursting into teary laughter. “Shit, Cas, yeah, of course you’re it for me, I just… we’ve never talked about living together and I was afraid to bring it up, I… fuck, sweetheart, thank you. I love you.”

As Dean cups his large, powerful hand gently on his face, Castiel takes in everything about him: the golden flare in his eyes, the beam of sunlight posing as a smile, the tenderness of his touch, the protective arm around Cleo. He knows why they never talked about it — because Dean is so careful and considerate of him, and because Castiel was afraid.

“Mia and I talked about our stuff and she had an idea. Remember what you said about tying you up?”

“You wanna talk? Now? After that?” Dean asks before realizing his joke could come off as disrespectful. Cas laughs, though, so Dean relaxes and says, “Okay.”

“Mia and I talked about our stuff and she had an idea. Remember what you said about tying you up?”

“Yeeeah,” Dean utters cautiously, attempting to hide the little bit of excitement the idea gives him.

“Well, I don’t want to restrain you like that, but we talked about a couple of things that we could do to extinguish the behaviors I’ve learned.”
Now Dean frowns. “Extinguish?”

“Right. So remember how there was a time when I wouldn’t let you touch my neck? How I had to get used to the idea, then do little things to work toward it, until eventually I didn’t feel panicked anymore? I felt that panic because I learned to feel it from previous experiences, and I still felt it even though you weren’t a threat. I had to unlearn it. Extinguish it.”

“Ah, okay. So because of all the stuff that happened, your body’s afraid it’s gonna happen again, so you have to train it or something.”

“Essentially. I’ve worked on it a lot already by talking with Mia, doing stuff on my own at home, and working on things with you. I think I just need to get over that final hurdle, which will take actual body contact. I noticed that when I held your hands I was able to get close to you and allow contact, because you couldn’t harm me.”

“Right,” Dean agrees. He’d thought of that, too, but he hadn’t known how to say that to Cas (except in the form of a joke — way to go, Dean, very adult of you).

“So, while we certainly could hold hands while we have sex, eventually it would be difficult because we would both want more. So, she came up with another idea. Mirroring.”

“Mirroring,” Dean repeats.

“Yes. Basically we do the same thing to each other at the same time, so if you have your hands on my arms, I have my hands on your arms, et cetera.”

Dean thinks a moment. He likes the idea regardless of the reason, but needs a bit of time to mull it over before he understands. “Oh, so if I’m touching your dick, you’re touching mine at the same time so that you feel like you have the same level of control I do. So if I yanked on you or something, you could do it to me, too, so I wouldn’t dare.”

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, Dean cringes (really, Dean, that’s the example you went with?), but Castiel snickers. “Crude but succinct.” He skates circles on Dean’s hands with his thumbs. “I’d like to try. What do you think?”

Dean relaxes and smiles. “I want to do whatever you want to do. You know I’m up for anything, sweetheart.” Cas nods, then detangles his right hand from Dean’s left. He slowly caresses Dean’s stubble with his fingertips. Leaning forward, Dean does the same, loving the tickly sensation of the two days’ growth. He chuckles to himself, thinking that even when he’s freshly shaven, his five o’clock shadow always seems to appear by noon. He traces over his eyebrows, down his nose, across his lips, and into the cleft of his chin, and it feels just as good to give as to receive. The room is warm and darker than usual at this hour thanks to an overcast sky, and between the heat, the dim light, and their mutual touches, Dean feels a little dizzy. Tracing a nipple, he lets his mind float aimlessly, hypnotized by the slow movement of their wandering hands. Cas chuckles, bringing Dean’s attention back into focus. “What?”

“‘Mirrors,’ Dean? Really?” Cas squints at him affectionately. He must have been humming, something akin to breathing for him. He often doesn’t realize he’s doing it.

Dean flushes, embarrassed. “Sorry. Me and my big mouth.”

“I don’t mind,” Cas smiles warmly. “I like it when you sing.”

“I have a terrible singing voice,” he argues, but Cas will hear none of his self-derision.
“You do not. I like it. You’re always so enthusiastic. Sing to me.”

“Sing to you?” At Cas’ shy nod, he chews his lip. He’s done this before, but there was always an edge of joking or goofiness to it, even though he was sincere. That’s not appropriate now. They resume their touches and Dean sings softly:

‘Cause I don’t wanna lose you now

I’m looking right at the other half of me

The vacancy that sat in my heart

Is a space that now you hold

As Dean continues singing, he’s surprised by Cas grasping both of his hands and swaying them side to side with a little bounce as he eventually joins in the chorus, channeling his inner Justin Timberlake. Dean laughs at how silly his boyfriend can be when he wants to be. Impulsively, and because he loves this man with all his heart, he leans forward and kisses him in adoration. As they separate, Cas’ eyes shine. He guides Dean’s hand down his chest and his abdomen, then lets it go. Dean feels warm, calloused fingertips on his scrotum. He gazes in wonder at Cas, who smiles and nods almost imperceptibly. Without leaving his gaze, Dean reaches down. At the first touch of his fingers to Cas’ scrotum, they both release shallow, shaky breaths. Dean watches him carefully. Cas takes a few more shaky breaths before his breathing seems to even out. His hand starts to move, so Dean’s does, too, stroking over the smooth, thin, hairless skin. He’s never been with anyone who shaved, and damn, the sensation is titillating. Cas sighs into it and his shoulders drop a little. Dean feels Cas’ fingers caress his inner thighs, then his balls again, then his perineum, all in slow, careful sweeps that he mimics on his brave, beautiful boyfriend. Cas’ breath catches every so often, but he resolutely continues, so Dean continues, too. His pulse flutters at Cas’ fingers curling around his erect cock, both because he loves the feel of Cas’ hand on him and because he knows he’s been given silent permission. Gently, he hugs his boyfriend’s penis the way he hugged his body in the early days: firm enough to comfort, loose enough to provide escape. It’s silky and half-hard and absolutely perfect. Cas mewls and his breath quickens. “Talk to me, sweetheart,” Dean coos.

“I’m okay,” he says, his voice betraying that he’s not quite okay but is trying to be. “I’m… it feels so good and yet my mind just…” Cas licks his bottom lip and breathes through his mouth.

“I love you so much,” Dean murmurs, gently bringing their lips together. “You are strong, and brave, and so damn sexy,” he grins after several more kisses. “You put a spell on me,” he sings, reversing the words and making Cas smile and his beautiful blue eyes glisten. Cas’ hand has come to rest around Dean’s cock, so Dean rests his, too; they hold each other as tenderly and carefully as when they hold each other’s hands. The hands that are locked together separate now, and Cas brings his hand up behind Dean’s neck to pull him closer. Dean copies the movement and sinks into Cas’ heart-melting, brain-freezing kiss. Tongues dance languorously together, an intoxicating exchange of dips and twirls. When they part, Cas draws Dean down with him to the mattress and hooks a leg around his. They resume a lazy trade of kisses, each of them with a hand under their heads while the other encircles each other’s cocks. There’s no pressure, no race to the finish line. Dean has learned to be in the moment and enjoy the ride for what it is rather than where he’s supposed to go. He closes his eyes, a dozy warmth infiltrating the space between them as their kisses slow along with their breathing. It’s warm, it’s safe, and he is so very happy.

Fingers thread through his hair from somewhere above him. The touch is tender, and for a moment he feels like he’s five again, his mother’s fingers brushing his damp hair from his sweaty forehead. Dean always overheated because he insisted on sleeping with lots of blankets, enjoying the weight of them. His eyelids flutter open to a pair of yellow-green orbs. “Hey, baby,” Dean rasps, his voice
still heavy with sleep. He collects the kitten who ended up back on the bed into his hand, then turns his head up to see Cas, who looks… fucking hot. “And hey, baby,” he purrs, his eyes drinking in the sight of Cas’ perfect body in a white button-down under a blue sweater, tight blue jeans, and black boots. The sweater makes his eyes stand out and everything is so fitted. Yum.

“Hey, there,” he grins, likely knowing the effect he’s having on him, and why shouldn’t he? Cas deserves to know how hot he is.

“What’re you all dressed up for?”

“Date night,” he says simply.

It’s been a while since they’ve been on a date, and Dean’s excited. They usually stay home, preferring to keep to themselves because they see so little of each other right now, but he loves showing Cas off, too. He dresses and grooms himself hurriedly, smiling and humming to himself.

Date night is dinner at a local restaurant that has recently added some vegan choices, followed by something Dean hasn’t done in years: bowling. Dean names Cas “Big Baller” and himself “Winky” on the scoring screen. He chooses the most obnoxious ball he can find and his fingers get stuck in it. Cas distracts him with whispered dirty talk in his ear that he usually reserves for phone sex and Dean lets him. They laugh the whole time and draw quite a bit of attention to themselves, and Dean is thrilled and gratified that he hasn’t noticed Cas scanning the area vigilantly as he used to do.

On their way home, they’re eating piece after piece of Cas’ Valentine’s Day gift — dark chocolate truffles Dean bought online from a vegan chocolatier (yup, doesn’t equal a house, but they’re still damn tasty) — when Cas taps on the steering wheel of the SUV and says, “I have a Valentine’s Day gift for you, too. Well, I’m not sure if you’ll perceive it that way. It’s for both of us, actually, but a specific part of it is for you.”

“Way to confuse the hell out of me, Cas,” he laughs. “What is it?”

“You’ll see. It’s at Benny’s.”

Dean shrugs — they dropped Cleo there earlier, anyway, so Dean figures he slipped it to Benny or Andrea then. There’s an unfamiliar vehicle parked in front of the house. Dean notes it with curiosity and peeks over at Cas, who looks much more anxious than Dean’s seen him in a while.

“You okay, sweetheart? Probably just a friend or Andrea’s mom. I can go get Cleo…”

“No.” He takes a deep breath. “No. Let’s go.”

Dean follows Cas, who has taken the lead despite his nervousness. They walk in and are greeted warmly by Benny (with Cleo in his burly arm) and an attractive brunette in denim and flannel. Andrea is nowhere to be seen. “Guys, this is Pam. Pam, Cas and Dean,” Benny says. Dean’s trying to place the name, but Cas is already shaking her hand apprehensively.

“Hi there, Cas,” the woman drawls warmly, then nods at Dean, who waves. He still can’t figure out how he knows her name.

“Hello,” Cas says formally. Usually he’d put on his winning smile for strangers, but with Pam his vulnerability is out on full display. “Thank you for meeting after hours. Benny said you might be able to help.”

“Gonna do my best, sugar,” she says with a warm smile. They sit at the kitchen table; Benny offers them drinks that they decline. Dean waits patiently for someone to tell him what the hell is happening. “You want these guys staying around or you want ‘em to skedaddle?”
“It’s fine for now,” Cas says.

“Alright. Tell me what you’re looking for,” she says kindly.

“An eraser,” Cas says quietly before clarifying, “I want to cover a tattoo on my back.”

Dean sits in stunned silence. *He’s getting his tattoo covered. Holy shit. This is huge.*

“Probably doable,” she says, “but I’ll have to see it to know for sure.” She shoots him an apologetic look; he nods in resignation. “So tell me what you want the new one to be.”

Dean watches Cas carefully as Cas takes his hand and licks his lips. “Well, I was thinking of a tree that reflects my life. I want it to look like those trees where you can see the progression through the seasons, except the seasons would be pieces of my life. And I want two male cardinals in the tree.” He glances at Dean. “For my new life.”

Dean feels his throat clench and his eyes burn. *The house. The tattoo. I am part of his life forever. I’m it for him.* He swipes at the wetness on his lower lashes; Cas kisses his hand and squeezes it, then turns back to Pam, presumably for further discussion. Dean isn’t sure what they talk about because his mind is currently riding the Tilt-a-Whirl at the Happyland Carnival. When the ride is over, Benny is standing up, excusing himself from the room and turning on brighter lights as he leaves. Cas’ hand trembles in his as he glances about the room, not wanting to make direct eye contact with Pam anymore, it seems. Dean scolds himself internally for his lack of attention when Cas needs him and quickly regains his focus.

“Cas, I’ve worked with lots of people whose partners did things to them that they thought were unspeakable,” she assures him. “They used their tattoos as a way to speak, and in my experience, it made it easier for them to speak about everything else in their lives. They found strength and courage and their voices. That’s what happened for me, too.” Dean notices Cas’ eyes settle on her. “I will never say I know how you feel, but I have my own story. I know what shame feels like. But you have nothing to be ashamed of.” Dean rubs his back and Cas leans into the touch as he keeps his eyes focused on Pam. “Whatever you show me, whatever you say, it’s all confidential between you and me. Benny told me a little bit, whatever it was that you said he could share with me, and no one’s gonna know any of that info but me.” Cas nods. “Ready to show me?”

“No, but here it goes, I guess,” he smiles weakly, standing up and removing his sweater.

“Do you want Dean to stay?” she asks. Dean’s not sure why he didn’t think to ask himself. He should have, but he assumed Cas would want him here. He stands, ready for whatever decision Cas makes.

“I’d like him to stay,” Cas says, trusting blue eyes on him, “unless you’d rather not, Dean.”

Dean smiles softly. “No place I’d rather be,” he answers, kissing his cheek. Cas hugs him with one arm and a long sigh before unbuttoning his shirt and removing it, followed by unbuttoning and lowering his jeans and briefs enough for her to see. He sits backwards on the chair so his entire tattoo is on display. Dean sits near his head and takes his hand.

“We can absolutely cover this up,” she says after a few minutes. The breath that escapes from Cas’ mouth is a full-body gust of relief. Dean restrains his own, not wanting Cas to misunderstand why he’s relieved — he wouldn’t care if the tattoo stayed there forever, but he knows that having it gone will do wonders for his sweetheart. Pam gives him a large, handheld mirror, then holds one of her own so he can see what she’s about to describe. “The trunk will come up here” —she traces her fingers along his back— “and will obscure all of the old markings. The canopy of the tree will
branch out over your mid and upper back and across your shoulder blades. The branch with the birds will fall right around here. What do you think?”

Cas smiles, small but hopeful. “Perfect,” he says.

“Good. Is it alright if I take a photo of it? It’ll help me with scale and whatnot. I swear it’ll stay with me and no one else.” He agrees reluctantly and sits still while she snaps a few photos.

“Alright, all done. I’ll draw something up and we’ll get you in. I’d like to do it after hours if that’s okay with you, probably on a Sunday when we’re closed so we can have the day. We’ll need at least two full days for what I have in mind.”

“You don’t have to do that. I don’t want to inconvenience you,” Cas frowns.

“I want to. I need you to come down to my studio because I have the right setup and sanitation there, and I’d like you to have the opportunity to be there without anyone interrupting us, okay?”

Dean’s heart swells at the thoughtfulness of this woman. He shoots her a grateful smile that matches his boyfriend’s smaller one. Cas nods.

“Good. Give me a few days to draw this up. I have some ideas but I might draw a couple of options, and it’ll need to be pretty detailed, I think.” She stands and collects her things as Cas dresses. When he’s finished, she takes his hand. “It’s gonna be beautiful, sugar. You deserve beauty and joy, alright?” With a smile, she squeezes his hand and waves goodbye. Dean watches her go, certain that some angels wear denim and flannel.

Chapter End Notes

So much happened! Do you have a favorite part?

Some of you were right-on with your predictions. :)

Songs referenced in this chapter:
"Mirrors," Justin Timberlake
"I Put a Spell on You," Jalacy "Screamin' Jay" Hawkins (Dean reverses the words for his own devices, lol)
Feels and personal growth comin’ your way. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel’s ears and throat are burning cold as he runs, taking care to stay in the fresh snow for better traction. He doesn’t generally run when it’s this cold out, but he felt like he needed the sting of the frigid air to keep him focused. Today is the day.

He gives a quick knock on Sam and Jess’ door when he arrives at their place to deliver Sully, who he’d invited to join him. The Australian Shepherd’s eyes are bright and his tongue is lolling out of his mouth happily. He smiles at Sam as he returns their fur-baby (to be joined by a human baby, as Dean and Castiel had suspected), then trots home to shower. It’s a full day session today; Pam had suggested a half-day since it’s his first— well, second—but he assured her his pain tolerance is quite high. It’s a Sunday, a week and a half after they discussed the tattoo at Benny’s. Dean was in Tampa last night and is home already, crashed out on the bed after a redeye flight he insisted on taking to be here for this even after Castiel insisted he didn’t have to. Secretly, he’s glad Dean didn’t listen to him.

After a hot, satisfying shower that encourages his blood to circulate to his extremities once again, Castiel moves Cleo to her bed on the floor, then snuggles next to Dean. He is naked and on edge. He hasn’t seen Dean since the tattoo discussion, and though their nights have been satisfying over video, he longs for more. He’d love to touch him and wonders if he’d enjoy waking up to him giving him head, but since he isn’t sure he doesn’t risk it. Besides, they don’t have to leave for another couple of hours, and Dean needs his rest. He can pleasure himself as he lies next to his incredibly thoughtful, devoted, sexy boyfriend, however.

With a lubed hand, Castiel slides over his nipples, then slowly strokes his cock to firmness as his eyes trace over what he can see of Dean’s body — his handsome face, relaxed as a summer day in sleep, then his muscular arms and chest, both sprinkled with light hair, down to his abdomen and ending at his navel. He has to recall the rest from memory, since everything else is covered, but that isn’t very hard to do. He hums quietly in pleasure as he contemplates his innocent boyfriend, who has no idea that Castiel is getting himself off to him right now. That feeling of power swells through him again — not power over his man, but power to give himself what he needs, knowing he would have Dean’s permission. Hoping he would, anyway. He stutters slightly in his efforts. Would it bother Dean? Should he not pleasure himself to Dean without his permission? Does that violate him somehow? He’s done it before, obviously, but only when Dean was awake or to his photo when he couldn’t get him directly. Was that wrong? He starts to rethink this idea, but before he gets too far, he tries to see it from Dean’s point of view, knowing everything he knows about him. Dean wants him to achieve orgasm as much as he wants. Dean loves watching Castiel pleasure himself. He’s told him before that he’s used Dean’s photo to masturbate and Dean was turned on by it. Deciding that Dean would probably be fine with it and, in fact, like it, Castiel continues with vigor. He pretends Dean is watching him, plumping his bottom lip with his teeth and running his hand through his hair and down his chest, circling his hard nipples and fingering them in barely-there touches that always send his endorphins racing. Tiny, high-pitched whines escape his throat without permission; he clamps his mouth shut as his eyebrows knit together. A
particularly satisfying twist of his wrist punches a gasp out of him. He breathes in sharply, knowing
the noise probably will wake Dean, and sort of not caring now; a greedy part of him really wants
Dean to be awake. He gets his wish.

Green eyes blink open slowly, then all at once. “Holy shit, fuck,” he whispers.

“Couldn’t help myself, baby,” he tells him honestly, using the pet name he reserves for the
bedroom. He surges forward and drags Dean’s bottom lip into his mouth, suckling at it lightly
before kissing him fully as he continues to stroke his aching cock, which has managed to stay erect.
“You’re so fucking hot.” He bites his lip, half-coy and half-nervous. “Is it okay?”

“Baby, you can get off with me any way you want, any time,” he says before cradling his face and
kissing him again. He keeps his hands in place as Castiel works himself over. But Castiel wants
more.

“Touch me,” Castiel says. He strokes his free hand down to thumb at Dean’s nipple, so Dean
mirrors the action, both of them groaning at the feel of the lube that Castiel had deposited there
earlier when he started touching himself. Dean snakes his other hand around his own cock,
smeared pre-ejaculate around the head, which never fails to drive Castiel mad with want. He
quickly reaches out and touches Dean’s penis with his lubed hand before returning to his own, both
to mix Dean’s own lubrication with his and to help slick the way for his boyfriend. It’s a steamy
scene, Castiel knows, and the two men getting themselves off while stimulating each other at the
same time is intense for him. Heat rising, nerves zinging, pleasure tugging, Castiel sees his
destination just a couple of flicks away.

“Dean, Dean,” he calls breathlessly. He pulls his hand quickly away from his own cock while
simultaneously dragging Dean’s hand from his, then switches their hands before he can think about
it too much and crushes their mouths together. His gut leaps not in fear, but in excitement, a
shivering thrill under his sternum that zips both to his cock and through his throat. He cries out
derately, wantonly, the pleasure cresting with the touch of another until he arches his back and
comes loudly, his voice repeating the same chorus over and over until he curls in on himself in
oversensitivity.

Seconds that could have been hours pass before Castiel returns to his body, having left it for a
moment in the best way. He opens his eyes to see his favorite person in the world staring back at
him with adoration and a huge smile. Castiel thinks he should be serious in this moment, perhaps,
but he feels like giggling, so he does until it turns to bubbly laughter, light and floaty and carefree.
Dean mirrors this, too, until it’s impossible to know whether they’re flushed from their emotional
or their sexual release. Probably both.

Having ended up on his back after his powerful orgasm, Castiel rolls to his side, then scoots over
until he can climb onto Dean. He lies atop him, their spent penises sticky with lube and come, and
props himself onto his elbows. “I’m getting myself back, Dean,” he says.

“Yes, you are, sweetheart,” Dean replies, thumbing away the tears that ended up on Castiel’s face
somehow. He doesn’t remember crying, but it’s entirely possible.

Castiel sighs, pecking Dean’s lips before settling on his chest. “Feels damn good.”

An hour later, showered (again) and sated, they make the short drive to Pam’s studio. It’s
sophisticated yet warm and extremely clean. Framed photos of Pam’s work as well as other art
pieces hang on the walls; glossy wood floors complement the black reception desk, workstations,
and chairs as well as the gold accents around the space. Large mirrors reflect both mood lighting
and the more practical task lighting. Best of all, there isn’t another soul around save for Pam, who
greets them with an understated cheerfulness that Castiel appreciates. Despite his personal victory and the endorphin boost earlier, he’s nervous. She leads him to a long table, much like a massage table.

“Have a seat. I want to show you the design before we go any further.”

After talking with him a few times on the phone over the last week and him sending her pictures that appealed to him and examples of some of his own woodwork, she’d decided to draw one design based on their conversations and what she understood of Castiel’s artistic preferences.

“It’s very important to tell me if this doesn’t sit right with you. This is forever, so please don’t be afraid to tell me. I won’t be insulted. Ready?” When he nods, she shows him the design and his breath stills in his lungs.

The trunk of the tree is thick and sturdy, able to withstand any calamity, with bark so detailed he feels like he could peel it into his hand. The canopy is full and breathtaking. It begins on the left with buds that progress into young, heart-shaped leaves like the leaves of the eastern redbud or white basswood. The leaves grow large and lush until about a quarter of the way over, when there is a sliver of bare branches. Following that, the tree buds again, growing fuller and fuller as the eye slides to the right. And the final piece, the one Castiel needed to have more than anything, is two male cardinals perched in a nest, their heads bent toward each other, wings touching between them. “It’s everything I wanted and more,” he tells Pam sincerely. He turns when he hears Dean sniffle next to him; he’s smiling, holding back tears. “Like it, dear heart?”

“Love it, sweetheart,” he says with a tender press of lips to Castiel’s temple.

“Let’s do it,” Pam says. Soft music fills the room, loud enough to hear but not loud enough to distract, just a gentle presence. Castiel takes off the required clothing and lies prone on the table. She shaves the space where she’ll apply the transfer, then cleans him up and prepares the transfer. “Last chance, sweetie,” she says, hovering above him. “Do you want to say goodbye to it or anything?”

He sits up and stares at the old markings in the mirror she gives him. He has spent far too long being ashamed of his body, being ashamed of this tattoo and everything that came with it. “Good riddance,” he mutters, handing the mirror off to Dean, who smiles at him proudly.

“Amen,” she says as she pats his shoulder. He’d opened up to her about the tattoo, enough for her to understand the significance of this for him. He lies flat again and she applies the transfer to his back. “Check it out for me, make sure it’s where you want it.”

He sits up again and his eyes widen in wonder. The ugly, horrid brand is gone. He can see a little of it peeking through, but knows that will be taken care of when she shades everything in. “Thank you, God, oh my God,” he babbles in a whisper.

“It’s perfect, Cas,” Dean says with a kiss to his head.

“Yes, it is,” he agrees. Pam takes this as her cue and she stands him up and moves him to a reclining chair he will lean into for the next several hours.

“Alright, the next step in your new life, sugar. Here we go.” The bzzzzz of the machine joins the music in perfect harmony, and Castiel’s eyes well with tears as he feels the first prick of the needle into his skin. He chalks it up to discomfort with the foreign feeling, then to discomfort with a practical stranger’s hands on his lower back, both seeming like reasonable explanations that he can rationalize until his eyes dry. But they don’t dry. He tries to stay as still as possible, but his body
shakes with restrained sobs until the buzzing stops. She pats him on the shoulder. “Just let ‘em come, sugar. They’re cleansing tears. It’s your body letting go of the old pain. Happens all the time.”

He doesn’t look at Dean as he weeps face-down through the hole in the head cushion, but he feels his steadfast presence anyway as Dean takes his hands and rests his head against his. A nose or lips rub the top of his head every so often, and sweet words and sounds of love reach his ears even through his sobs. The shame and fear twist his stomach and choke him simultaneously, but unlike before, they recede, replaced by courage and authenticity and love, love, love.

*You are a fighter. You are strong. You will overcome. You already have.*

*You are worthy. You are loved.*

Taking a few deep breaths, he sits up and wipes his eyes with his hand, then settles into the chair more comfortably. “I’m ready,” he says.

The tears still fall quietly, but he lets them because he deserves them. He deserves to grieve. He deserves to shed the pain of his past. He deserves to move forward. The needle presses on, and he takes comfort from it and from Dean’s hands wrapped around his and their heads against each other, like the cardinals.

“Got any rock music?” he asks when they take a break for lunch. He’s feeling rebellious. Strong. Celebratory.

“Absolutely,” she grins.

They pass the afternoon listening to metal and punk, which are a little more extreme than Castiel tends to prefer but it feels good. He sings along to what he knows and hums along when he doesn’t. They ask each other “Would you rather” questions, challenge each other with trivia questions Dean finds online, and laugh at Dean’s stories of life on the super- and motocross circuits. Toward the end of the day Dean switches to what they call “their” playlist. Castiel’s face is turned toward his boyfriend, who sings to him and kisses him like he’s the most precious thing in the world. He doesn’t know how many people can say they’ve been serenaded while being tattooed, but he’s glad to be among them. He also doesn’t know how many people have sat here with their loved ones —many, he’s sure— but he knows none of them have been loved as well as Dean’s loved him.

“I love you,” Castiel says, trailing a finger down Dean’s cheek. He sees the quiet fatigue around his eyes, a fatigue that Dean will never complain about even though he certainly could. How many sacrifices has Dean made for him? He knows the big ones, but how many little ones does Dean make without ever complaining? Multitudes, probably.

“I love you, sweetheart,” he murmurs just for him. Dean’s hand rests on his cheek; he kisses the heel of his hand and his wrist as he stares into leafy green eyes.

“All done for today,” Pam announces, stretching out her slim body. “Wanna check it out?”

With a nod, Castiel stands, rolling his neck and back. He approaches the full-length mirror with anticipation — of what, he’s not sure. Dean smiles, then his eyes widen when he catches the reflection in the mirror. Dean could see everything, of course, but he had mostly stayed focused on him, which Castiel appreciated more than he could say. Pam holds a large mirror in front of him and he gasps.
It’s gone. It’s gone.

She did the entire outline, then focused her efforts on his lower back, shading and detailing expertly. His eyes search, trying to find any hint of the old tattoo, but it is well and truly gone. Laughter bubbles through his chest. He smiles at Pam, then at Dean.

“Getting myself back,” he grins breathlessly at the love of his life.

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Dean storms around the practice track, focused only on finishing so he can get the hell out of there. He takes the turns low to the ground, nearly wiping out twice but correcting expertly. Shifting, maneuvering through other riders, taking jumps — all are done automatically, his muscles knowing exactly what to do when. He’s efficient, skilled, the best in his field... and bored to death.

“Winchester!” Eddie Wynn calls from the sidelines when he finishes his run. Dean parks his bike and rambles toward his coach on bowed legs. Eddie was a champion for several years before leaving the sport. When Dean learned he was starting a coaching program, he hired him on the spot and became his first client. He’d admired Eddie for years. Eddie is a no-nonsense sort of guy, and a bit ornery compared to Dean’s usual cheerful nature. They complement each other and have worked well together. He holds whatever Eddie says in the highest esteem.

“Yes, Coach?” he grins, knowing Eddie hates being called that.

“You’re an asshole.”

Well, maybe not everything in the highest esteem.

“What?”

“Where’s your head at? Get off the damn track, I gotta talk to you.”

Dean sighs and makes his way to the changing area. He strips off his safety equipment, makes sure his crew has everything they need from him, then shuffles his way to the parking lot, where he knows Eddie will be waiting for him. Sure enough, he’s waiting by the trucks. Eddie beckons Dean to follow him with a wiggle of his fingers. They find a grassy area far from the commotion and sit. Dean stares at the ground.

“Tell me what’s goin’ on in your head.”

“Nothin’.”

“Can you skip the dancin’ and just spit out what’s on your mind? You could’ve hurt yourself out there. Your body was there, but your head was somewhere else entirely.”

With a frustrated huff, Dean rubs his chin and raises his face toward the sky. It’s a clear day, contrails from an airplane high above them the only thing that breaks the endless blue. The sun is warm and the breeze is light. He hates it. He wants the biting wind, heavy clouds that threaten snow, a sun that does nothing to warm his face and leaves the frost on his windshield unmelted. He wants home. He wants Cas. “Homesick,” he shrugs. At Eddie’s raised brow, he elaborates, “I haven’t seen Cas in two weeks, and it’s gonna be another week and a half before I can ‘cause of the practices and promotional shit they got me doing.” He twists his mouth unhappily. Cas is getting the rest of his tattoo done tomorrow and he can’t be there.

“You’ve been breaking your damn neck to see that man,” Eddie gruffs, not unkindly.
“Yeah.”

“Why not just stay home, then?”

Dean flicks his gaze toward his coach. “I did that already when I got hurt.”

“I mean retire, son.”

It’s not as if Dean never thought about it. He has. But he can’t. “Cas says he’s fine with my job.”

Eddie eyes him shrewdly. “I know you love that man of yours, but I don’t think this is just about him. When was the last time you enjoyed the job?”

Reluctantly, and only because Eddie will see right through his bullshit, he admits, “Been a long time. Couple of years, anyway.”

“Why’re you still doin’ it?”

“Uh, it’s my job?”

“People get new jobs all the time. You know you’re not gonna do this shit all your life.”

“Yeah, I know, I know. Still at the top of my game, though. I can’t leave yet.”

“Why not? You don’t gotta wait. Leave on your own terms, not ‘cause you’re forced out of it. What’s the point of doin’ it if you’re miserable? You got family, got your man, got your little kitty-cat”—Dean grins at his coach’s gentle teasing—“got plenty of money unless you were stupid and blew it all, and you got talent and a brain in your head.”

Dean ruffles his hair in thought. “I don’t want to disappoint anyone.”

“Can’t control that, and if they don’t get it, well, that’s for them to figure out. I know you like makin’ people happy, but you can’t live for others, son. Gotta live for you.” Eddie leans forward and claps Dean on the shoulder. “Do you know why I retired?”

Dean’s always been curious about why the man left in the prime of his career, but he never dared to ask. When Dean shakes his head, Eddie reclines on his hands. “I was on top, too, like you. But I was miserable. Workin’ my ass off, not seein’ my wife half the year, missing my kids growing up…. it sucked. I asked myself, ‘Whaddaya want out of life, Wynn?’ Turns out I wanted to go campin’ with my kids.” Dean smiles, imagining him out in the wild with his two daughters. “So I talked to my wife. She was supportive, so I quit. It’s not what I told everyone, of course, but that’s why. When the girls got old enough, I got the itch again and started the coaching thing. Works out pretty good.” The older man’s lips twitch in a satisfied smile. “So, whaddaya want out of life, Winchester? And no bullshit.”

Dean purses his lips in thought. “I’d like to be in one spot,” he answers. “I wanna… I dunno,” he answers. “I just wanna be home with Cas and Cleo, you know? Every time I have to leave Cas, I hate it. When I had all that time off, I got to spend it with him and it was awesome. I helped him with his stuff in his workshop and it was cool. I dunno if I’d wanna do that as a career or anything, but it was fun. It was a cool place to just talk. We’d go running and shit, too, and we’d cook together and just hang out. I want that. I mean I don’t have to be with him 24/7, but I wanna be home with him every night, not trying to squeeze everything into two or three days before I have to go back.” On a roll now, Dean continues, “And I like seeing my family. I live right next door to my brother and his wife now, and they’re having a kid. I’m gonna be Uncle Dean and I wanna be around for it. My folks aren’t too far away and Cas’ family’s just a few hours south of us. I wanna
see more of all of them. But none of that stuff earns me any money to live, so… as far as a job, I don’t know.”

“You gotta decide right away?”

“I guess I don’t have to,” he muses. “I’d be secure for a good long while.”

“Well alright then. Bein’ in one spot, havin’ your family nearby, bein’ home with your man… sounds like a pretty good life, son.”

“Yeah,” he smiles.

He thinks about his conversation with Eddie for the next week and a half. He’s not nearly as confident as Eddie that he can do something like this, but even the thought that he has choices seems to give him a renewed focus. His practices feel more productive and he feels more present with the guys. At the next race, he sees the track with a clarity he hasn’t seen it with in a long time, an alertness that makes the smile on his face genuine instead of put-on. Huh. He’d never realized he had his own fake smiles to make it through painful situations. In between promotional junkets and practices, he talks with Cas and Cleo (who doesn’t really seem to understand the video call concept) and with his family. He doesn’t mention his thoughts about his potential retirement, though. That’s a conversation he wants to have with Cas in person.

Cas is pretty sore from all the tattoo work and his latest “secret” project, so their nights aren’t spent getting off. Instead, much as they did before the phone sex started, they talk. Dean likes it just as much, and Cas isn’t complaining. That’s not to say he doesn’t want Cas. The need to touch him is maddening, and while it’s fun to get himself off and watch Cas do the same, it’s even more fun and satisfying to pleasure each other. He hopes it’ll happen again. They haven’t talked about the last time, when Cas switched their hands and they brought each other to orgasm. Cas was too tired and sore to try it again before Dean left, and they haven’t seen each other since. It was such a sudden thing that Dean’s hoping it wasn’t a fluke, that it was an actual breakthrough. Not that he wants to pressure Cas and not that he won’t accept whatever Cas wants to give or can give, but he wants to be as connected to him as he can be, including sexually. He wants to give him pleasure in every way he can think of.

It’s the first day of spring today, so of course there’s a snowstorm in Portland. His flight, he’s told, is the last one coming into or out of the Jetport. All others have been grounded or diverted. He sends a prayer of thanks and beats it out of there as fast as he can. Cas wanted to pick him up, concerned that his car wouldn’t make the trip, but Dean insisted that he stay home. No need for him to endanger himself. The visibility is shitty and his car really isn’t made for Maine winters (this is why his dad told him to garage it and get something with all wheel drive). He fishtails a couple of times and has to abide by the reduced speed on the highway but makes it home without too much drama. Home. It makes him smile as he thinks about it. They talked about what Dean would like to move into the house from his last place (not much) and when he’d like to move in (now, but the big stuff will have to wait until the snow clears), and they agreed that while he’s home over the next couple of days they’ll have keys made for him. He grins as the garage door opens; Cas must’ve been watching for him. He parks in the garage for the first time and enters the house through the connecting door.

Cas waits on the other side, smiling widely, with something in his hands. God, he’s missed his smile. He’s about to say so when Cas rushes him, crowding him against the door and pressing his muscular, eager body against him as he sucks the breath out of Dean. It takes him a moment to catch up, but when he does he leans forward to wrap his arms around his boyfriend, only to end up in his boyfriend’s arms instead as he’s lifted off the ground. Dean throws his head back as Cas
trails wet, urgent kisses along his jaw and throat, and he hangs on for the ride when Cas carries him to the couch, never separating his lips from Dean’s skin. He gazes at Cas dazedly when the man sets him down, then straddles him. “Welcome home, baby,” Cas says before diving into his mouth again. He strips off his coat, sweatshirt, and t-shirt, latching onto new skin as it’s revealed. Dean’s brain finally comes back online and peels Cas’ hoodie and t-shirt off him. He isn’t sure what to do with his hands, since Cas’ are everywhere, so he starts at his hair and works his way down, careful to avoid his back in case he’s still sore. He reaches his hips and stops, his fingers itching to slink under the loose sweatpants but hanging onto them instead. Cas pulls back. He meets Dean’s eyes as his hands tug on the fly of Dean’s pants. Dean nods and Cas grins wickedly before locking their lips together once again. He lifts his hips when Cas urges him to, then he feels the smooth nap of the microfiber couch cushion against his bare ass. He moans loudly when he feels smoothness of another sort — Cas’ unclothed cock rutting against his.

“Cas, babe, not gonna last,” he warns, embarrassed but too desperate for his boyfriend to care.

“I know, baby,” he answers in a particularly knowing way. He understands why Cas is so confident a moment later when a lubed hand (how did he do that?) grips both of their cocks and begins pumping. His hips buck involuntarily but are stillled by Cas’ body weight; he loves how comforting yet arousing the feeling of Cas on top of him is. He rakes his fingers through his own hair and pulls at it, just to keep him grounded. Cas seems determined to take him apart, his free hand joining Dean’s in his hair while he distracts him with his lips against his ear. “Baby,” he whispers. The sound of the love and want in his voice is breaking Dean; he sobs tearlessly, head pressed into the top of the couch, overwhelmed yet trying to stave off his orgasm as long as possible. “Dean? You okay?” he asks, concern now laced through his voice.

“Ye-e-e-es,” Dean moans, drawing the word into four syllables. “Oh God, Cas…”

Cas takes Dean’s hands and guides them to their cocks, then squirts lube all over the knotted mess and places his free hand on top of Dean’s so they’re moving as one. It’s too much, too much, and he feels himself straining at the seams of his own body, the energy desperate for release. But not yet. “Want you to come first,” he tells his lover. “Wanna make sure you get to come, babe.”

Cas’ eyes, wild with desire, soften in understanding and gratitude. “Oh Dean,” he sighs before his body opens and surrenders to bliss. That openness, exposing himself to Dean, is what carries Dean up and away. He stutters under Cas’ body, even heavier now in his relaxed state. They breathe heavily as they nuzzle into each other.

Dean finally musters enough brainpower to use words… well, one word. “Wow.”

“I missed you,” Cas says against his skin.

“I’m gonna have to be gone for three and a half weeks more often,” he jokes. Cas sits up and squints at him. “Actually, it sucked, so no,” Dean laughs. “But that was definitely awesome to come home to.”

“I’m happy you’re home, dear heart,” Cas grins, kissing his nose. “I love you pursuing what you love to do, but I love you being home, too.”

“Actually, I wanna talk to you about that,” Dean says, growing a bit serious before he brightens again. “But first things first.” He glances down at the sticky mess. Cas laughs and supports himself on Dean’s shoulders as he swings his legs off him to stand. He fetches a washcloth and cleans them both, then pulls Dean up by his hands and shimmies his underwear and jeans up his legs, securing them both in place and patting him gently when he’s finished. He leaves again with the washcloth, presumably to toss it into the laundry room, and returns with Cleo. Dean opens his arms; Cas gives
their furbaby to him, then sinks into his side. Dean holds his little family as the storm rages on outside.

“You’re going to put me to sleep with that lullaby you’re humming,” Cas teases. “Look, it already worked for Cleo.” Dean glances down at the kitten, whose tiny paws are limp. He grins widely and moves her paw with a wiggle of his index finger, then looks at Cas, whose blue eyes look especially tender and a little sad.

“What?”

Cas shakes his head. “You’re just… so loving,” he says. He cups his hand around Dean’s to hold their baby together, then leans against his shoulder and closes his eyes.

Dean plants a kiss into his hair. Second chances. New life. Getting himself back… or maybe, for Dean, exploring a new side of himself. He told Cas once that he has plenty of time to live the life he wants. Maybe it’s time to do just that.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: a “night of surprises”… and will Dean actually talk to Cas about retirement?

Love to you all <3
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

A night of surprises. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean had wanted to see Cas’ completed tattoo as soon as he walked through the door, but Cas had other (amazing, awesome, totally hot) plans. Their couch cuddling came to an end when the timer went off. Cas slipped out of his arms and into his shirt before Dean could sneak a peek. They ate vegan jambalaya (“adapted from Benny’s recipe,” Cas tells him), then Cas distracted him with a deep-dish vegan apple pie that was out of this world. Now that supper is over and everything’s cleaned up, Cas has declared a “night of surprises,” which Dean has to say started spectacularly already.

“Okay, I can’t wait any longer!” Cas jumps up with glee. He turns his back to Dean and plants his hands on the hem of his shirt. “Ready?” he asks over his shoulder.

“Ready, sweetheart,” he says, wiggling in his seat. Cas seems so excited, as excited as Dean’s ever seen him, and Dean is excited for him. Cas peels his shirt off and pulls his pants lower. Dean gasps, struck speechless. It’s even more beautiful than he’d expected—bark and leaves so detailed you’re sure you could feel them, light playing through the canopy despite it being a black and white tattoo, two gorgeous red cardinals perched together in a nest the only color—and he finds himself overcome with emotion. The tattoo is symbolic of Cas’ journey, yes, but Dean reads all of Cas’ hopes and dreams in it, too, hopes and dreams that feature him right by Cas’ side, a future that is full and lush and bright. To be given such a place in Cas’ life after everything… His hand flies to his mouth and his vision blurs.

“Dear heart,” Cas coos when he turns. He kneels in front of him, between Dean’s knees. “Dean. Are you okay? What do you think?”

“I’m just”—he wipes briskly at his eyes—“I’m just so fucking happy for you. It’s perfect. I love it.” Cas wraps him in a hug that feels huge in its ease and lack of caution.

“This was because of you, you know. You gave me the strength to do this.”

“Nuh uh. That strength’s all you, sweetheart.”

“It was our mutual strength,” Cas insists. “I may have gotten to this point eventually, but without your support and love, I really don’t know when or if. Yes, I’ve worked very hard to get here. But with your love, getting here was a hell of a lot easier.” Cas, still on his knees, brings Dean’s face to his for a kiss, then says, “There is one problem with the tattoo, though.”

Dean frowns. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Now I’m going to want to walk around shirtless all the time.” Mirth and confidence shine in his eyes. Dean can’t get enough of it.

“Soootoo, I’m waiting to hear what the problem is,” Dean says with a wink. Cas laughs, then stands
quickly and takes something out of the pocket of his sweatpants.

“Okay, surprise number two,” Cas announces. He turns Dean’s hand and places something in it.

Dean looks down at the metal objects that are poking at his skin. “Couldn’t wait, huh?” he asks, dangling keys. Cas shrugs unapologetically. “Good,” he grins. He plants an innocent peck on his lips that becomes less innocent. Cas eventually pulls away with hooded eyes. “I have another surprise for you, but we’ll wait on that one,” he says, smoothing a hand affectionately down Dean’s face. His constant warmth and strong yet gentle touch never fail to turn Dean to mush. “Tell me what you wanted to talk about.”

“What?”

“Just before we cleaned up earlier. You said you wanted to talk to me about something.”

_Man, the dude never forgets anything._ Doubt and guilt appear out of nowhere and he suddenly doesn’t want to talk anymore. “Um, I was just gonna talk to you about how much I hated being apart from you for almost a month. Can’t do that again. Thought if I get stuck doing that again maybe you could come down to see me,” he lies (and hates himself for it), though as he thinks about it it’s not a bad idea. “How about that surprise now?” Dean starts to stand, but Cas lays a hand on his shoulder and sits next to him.

“I’m happy to come down to see you, but are you sure that’s what you wanted to talk about?” he asks, suspicion obvious in his voice and his arched brow.

“I just missed you so much, Cas,” he says, burying his head into the crook of Cas’ neck. Cas must sense the sincerity in that, at least, because he holds him and lets the subject drop. Dean sighs in relief.

They sit and watch television for a while, though for Dean it’s really just an excuse to cozy up to his super-hot boyfriend with the tattoo that looks sexy as fuck on his back. He can’t keep his eyes off it. When the clock ticks to 9:00, Cas declares, “Time for surprise number three.” Dean grins excitedly, scoops up Cleo, and follows Cas upstairs. When Cas walks past their bedroom, Dean giggles gleefully. He thinks he knows what’s coming. Cas looks over his shoulder and grins. “Ready?” he says at the closed door of the master bedroom. When Dean nods, Cas opens the door and stands aside.

Dean’s jaw drops in awe. The walls are silvery-blue, a perfect backdrop to the handmade headboard. It looks like he made it from old fencing… the old fencing they tore out of the pool area, as a matter of fact. He sanded it down yet preserved the weathered look, then separated the pieces and reassembled them to form a point in the middle, like the roofline of a house. There are two complementary dressers with simple lines, a pair of nightstands with pewter, seeded glass pendant lights hovering above them and, leaning prominently against the wall, the gorgeous mirror with the silver frame they found on their trip. “Cas…” he utters as he circles the room, lost for any more words.

“Sam, Benny, and Donna helped me out so it would be ready on time.”

“Cas, it’s absolutely perfect.”

“You really like it?”

“It looks even better than the design you showed me.” He walks to the bed and plops Cleo onto the thick comforter, then passes his hand lightly over the top of the headboard. “I love this. You didn’t
“Tell me you were doing this.”

Cas shrugs. “I thought it was symbolic.”

“Symbolic?” Dean asks with a raise of his brows.

“Because we were neighbors. Neighbors… fences… you know. And because you helped me tear down the barriers that I put up.”

Dean smiles goofily, feeling heat rise in his cheeks. He hides his face as he shakes his head. Cas always makes him feel so daffy. “Guess we made a love connection instead of Sully,” he mutters, rubbing at his neck and staring at his stockinged feet.

“Well, you were quite neighborly,” Cas jokes, lifting Dean’s face. His easygoing smile, his sparkling eyes, and his relaxed body are such a contrast from the nervous, guarded man he met months ago. Dean licks his lips and bites at them, affection and desire rising in his body like high tide. He reaches for Cas’ hands and draws him into a kiss. Cas turns them and walks Dean backwards a couple of steps until his legs bump the mattress. Deft fingers relieve Dean of his clothes, then dance over the lines of his body until his knees grow weak. No longer able to stand, he sits and drags Cas onto his lap, where Cas works him over for several minutes before sitting back. “What would you like to do in our new bed, neighbor?” he asks in a breathy purr.

Dean swallows. He has some ideas, but… “Um, can I undress you?” he starts.

“Okay,” Cas says. He stands and Dean follows him. Carefully, Dean removes his gray sweatpants that hang so deliciously off him, then his boxer briefs and socks. Standing nude in their new bedroom, Dean joins their hands, pressing closer until every part of them touches. He saves their mouths for last; he slides his nose and lips along Cas’ face, inhaling his sea and sawdust scent and tasting the tang of his skin as he drags his tongue along his jaw, before he locks their lips together. They suck and lick slowly at first, then faster and with more ferocity. Knuckles whiten as their grips tighten. Cocks bump and bounce off each other in a sort of mating dance. Their moans harmonize in lusty pleasure.

“Cas,” Dean gasps after a particularly satisfying kiss.

“Yes, Dean?” he asks.

“Can I… can I…” Shit. I shouldn’t. I can’t. Afraid to ask for what he wants, he sticks to safer territory and peppers kisses all over Cas’ neck and chest, flicking his tongue over his hard nipples with a light touch that he knows makes Cas squirm in the best way. He continues his path until he reaches his navel. He looks down at Cas’ shiny cock, engorged and glistening. He licks his lips. But oh, I want. His eyes must stay too long, because he thinks he feels Cas’ eyes on him. Sure enough, when he looks up Cas is staring at him.

“What do you want to do?”

Suck on your cock until you scream in pleasure. Come in your mouth. Ride you until I’m sore. Show you what it should feel like to have someone inside you. “Got everything I need right here, sweetheart,” he says before he trails kisses back up to Cas’ face. His very pissed-off face.

“Your avoidance of the question was pitiful,” Cas says sternly. “I thought you were going to trust me.”

“What? I do trust you, babe. Come on, I don’t want to fight when I only get you for a few days.”
“If you don’t want to fight, then don’t give us something to fight about.” He sits and folds his arms.

“I’m not trying to!” Dean says, throwing out his arms.

“Oh please. Do you think I didn’t notice you staring at my dick?”

“I wasn’t…”

“Uh huh.”

Dean sighs. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For staring.”

Dean winces as if he’s opened a too-hot oven as he’s blasted by Cas’ death-stare.

“Why? Why are you sorry? And furthermore, why do you not stand up for yourself? Why do you not ask for anything for yourself?” He stands and paces, not giving Dean a chance to answer. “I would hope you would be staring. I would hope you want me in that way, and I would hope you’d ask. But you’re not asking. Again, you’re just making the decision for me.”

_Fucking great. Now he’s pissed. I hate this, I hate this, I hate this._ “Well, you could ask!” he lashes out.

“I could, but we’re talking about you right now and why you don’t trust me and why you won’t ask for anything for yourself. I have started the majority of these conversations. If there is something you want from me, ask. The worst that can happen is that either I say no, or we try and I have a reaction.”

“But I don’t want you to have a reaction!” _Doesn’t he see that I don’t want him to hurt?_

“Well, I don’t want to, either, but we both need to be able to ask for what we need and _trust each other—_”

“I do trust you!”

“Not with this. You don’t trust me enough to give me your desires and wishes and… the important shit that goes on in your head, and I don’t know why.” Cas sits again, then gently tugs on Dean’s hand until he sits next to him. “Listen to me: I _won’t_ break. I have survived a lot worse than you wanting something from me. You want me to trust your judgment and value your opinions. I’ve worked on that. How about you trust my judgment? And how about you trust your own judgment and value your own opinions? How about you value yourself as much as you value me? I know you want more out of our sexual relationship. And I know you were lying through your teeth about what you wanted to talk about earlier.” Cas points a finger at him, but it feels like a gentle call to the carpet rather than a rebuke. “You drive me nuts with this stuff. Even the sun gets hidden by the clouds sometimes. You have sunshine down to your soul, dear heart, and you make so many people happy just by being you. Asking for what you want, talking about your own stuff… that doesn’t dim your light. That doesn’t make you a bad person. If people don’t get that you have wants and needs too, then fuck them. You don’t have to sacrifice yourself. Not even for me.”

Dean breathes in the love that is permeating the air and nods. It feels so good to have someone recognize what’s underneath his happy exterior, to see that even though he’s a positive guy, that
doesn’t mean he’s one-dimensional.

“I’m not used to it,” he admits. “I’m used to being there for everyone else. It’s hard to ask for things for me sometimes.”

“I am your partner, Dean. Lean on me,” Cas says, then pauses. He smiles and nuzzles his nose as he sings softly, “When you’re not strong, and I’ll be your friend…”

Dean laughs at the habit Cas has picked up from him. Cas has trusted him with the darkest parts of himself. It’s only fair that Dean give him the same, even if it’s uncomfortable… especially if it’s uncomfortable. He kisses him lightly, then beckons Cas to follow him to the top of the bed. He props the pillows against the headboard, drapes the blankets over their laps, and starts talking.

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“I don’t know if I wanna race anymore,” he blurs. Castiel tilts his head and waits, knowing it might take time for Dean to collect his thoughts. He’s so used to denying himself that it’s probably difficult for him to talk about something so big. Dean stares at his lap and continues, “I just don’t feel it anymore. When I was 18 and thought I knew it all, it was great. I was young, I had no one to answer to, I had the world at my feet. Traveling with the guys was like one big party or sleepover or some shit. I met people and banged around, I got to see a bunch of places and ride cool bikes, I had money. I loved it. Nothing and no one kept me from wanting that life. And now I…”

“Now you…?” Castiel prompts, a hand lifting Dean’s chin.

“Now I hate it,” he shrugs. “I hate it and I’m just not happy.”

Castiel can tell by the set of his shoulders that Dean is braced for a negative reaction. He takes his hand and kisses his knuckles, pouring as much love as he can into the simple gesture. “Dear heart, I wish you’d told me how unhappy you are. I feel horrible that you’ve been carrying this around with you, dealing with it all by yourself.” Dean shrugs a shoulder. “What do you hate about it?”

“Most of it,” he admits. “The travel sucks ass. I miss family events because I work every weekend during the season. People think I’m just a dumb jock. The guys are fine, but we’re in really different places in our lives and I just don’t feel like I relate to them anymore. It’s hard on my body. I’m a commodity. And I hate being away from you and Cleo, and my family, and our friends and the house.”

“Hmm. What would you miss about it?”

“Some of the travel is cool, and the riding, but I can do those things on my own. Um, I’d miss the money, probably.” He huffs a small laugh; Castiel strokes his face. “I’d miss the fans, maybe, just hearing people talk about their dreams and shit or how I helped them through a tough time. I’d miss mentoring the guys.”

“What do you think you just need a break from it or are you ready to move on to the next thing?”

He exhales a long, heavy breath. “You know, I… I think I’m ready to move on. The break was good for me, but it just made me realize how unhappy I was. Truth be told, I think I just stuck with it as long as I did just so I wouldn’t let people down, and because I didn’t have anything else to come home to anyway. Now I do. I have you guys and I’m neighbors with my brother and I have some friends in the neighborhood. I just really feel like I’m ready to set down some roots.” Dean reaches behind him to trace the tree on his spine. When he shivers at the light touch that he loves so much, Dean grins mischievously and keeps doing it as he leans forward to place tiny kisses on
his neck. It’s hard to stay focused on the conversation, which he assumes is Dean’s goal.

“Stop trying to distract me and yourself,” Cas smiles as he pushes Dean back gently. “We’re still talking.”

Dean faceplants onto Castiel’s shoulder. “Yeah, alright.”

Castiel chuckles and ruffles the hair at the nape as he rubs soothing lines along his neck. “So, if you decide to retire, when do you plan to do that and what do you want to do with your time?”

“Think I’d retire after supercross but before motocross, so after the last supercross event in May. After that, I dunno.” Dean looks up at him, his brows pinched and his expression worried. “I have enough money to pay my share, though, don’t worry. I won’t sponge off you, I swear. I’ll get a job and be outta your hair. I don’t know what yet…”

“Dean, don’t worry about it,” he soothes his boyfriend. He never even thought about Dean sponging off him. “I have money saved. Chuck has been generous and I try to be frugal. I trust you not to ‘sponge’ off me. And as for the job, there’s no rush. I’m going to be busy getting my business going again, so you can help me if you want, or you’re free to do your own thing.” He gathers Dean in his arms and cradles his head. “This could be a really exciting time for you. You could help out at the practice track, open your own place, volunteer somewhere, even go back to school or do something completely different.”

Dean hums. “I could finish my degree, maybe. Don’t have much left.”

“You could. Or you could start a whole new one if business isn’t your thing anymore. Some of your credits would probably transfer.”

“Yeah, that’s true. You wanna date a hot college student, Cas?” He looks up and wiggles his brows.

“Eww, don’t make it sound pervy,” Castiel laughs at his goofy, lovable boyfriend. “But yes, if you are that student.” He kisses Dean atop his head. “You don’t have to decide tonight, though, dear heart. Tonight you have to rest up, because tomorrow is your introduction to homeownership. There’s going to be a lot of wet, heavy snow to clear.”

“Yay,” he says sarcastically, though he’s smiling.

“I’ll make sure your reward is worth it,” Castiel smiles devilishly. He presses a wet kiss under Dean’s ear, making him squirm and giggle. “So, the other thing we need to talk about.” His boyfriend pouts adorably, but Castiel won’t be swayed. “You were staring at my dick like it was the most delicious thing you’d ever seen.”

Dean curls his arm in front of his face, a habit that the cat also does, which makes Castiel snicker. He moves Dean’s arm. “You want a taste, don’t you?”

“Cas,” he blushes, not able to look him in the eyes.

“Dean, we’ve said a lot worse during phone sex.”

“I know, but that’s… I don’t know, we’re not in the same room and you can’t get, like, nervous.”

“So this is about me getting nervous? We’ve dealt with that before.”

“Yeah, but that’s usually when it’s something you want or we both want and… I don’t know, I
just… it’s just something I want, so, you know.”

“Ah. The crux of the matter.”

Dean shrugs. “It’s no big deal.”

Castiel strokes his face tenderly. “It is to me. I want you to be able to ask for things you want. Although I have to ask… why don’t you think I want you to blow me, exactly?”

Dean’s eyes dart to Cas’ face. “Uh… um… well, I just figured with everything that happened, you know, with that, you might get nervous.”

“Yup, I might. But we’ve handled that before, like I said.”

“Yeah, but… it’s just that everything is going well and we just managed to touch each other, you know? I don’t wanna rush you and hurt you.”

“I appreciate that,” Castiel says, because he does. The care that Dean takes with him is nothing short of phenomenal. “But it’s important for me to try things, even if I’m going to be uncomfortable. And like we’ve talked about before, I need to hear that you have expectations of me, too. I mean, I have hopes, I have wants, I ask things of you. I know you do, too, and I want you to be able to ask.”

Dean nods. “Okay.”

“So ask.”

“Right now?” At Castiel’s nod, Dean groans. Castiel chuckles at him affectionately. He knows how hard it is to be pushed to do something that’s good for you but uncomfortable. “Alright, um… can I… blow you?” Castiel bites his lip so he doesn’t laugh outright at the adorable way Dean is blushing and worrying his lip with his teeth.

“Yes… but I’d like to mirror you the first couple of times, if that’s okay.”

Dean looks up at Castiel with wide, hopeful eyes. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s shit’s hot anyway. I mean — you know what I mean,” he stammers.

“I know what you mean,” Castiel laughs, pulling him close for a steamy kiss.

Castiel moves the cat to her small bed on the floor, then the boyfriends sink under the covers and worship each other’s bodies for a while. Castiel makes the conscious decision to allow Dean to wander uninhibited, lying on his back and keeping his own hands behind his head in a gesture of relaxation. He focuses on keeping his muscles loose and his breathing even. *You are safe with him, Castiel. He loves you. You are safe.* Dean doesn’t seem to notice at first, but when he does, his touches become even more reverent and tender. Light shines in his eyes like a sunbeam through stained glass. It’s breathtakingly beautiful to see Dean so genuinely, deeply happy, and all it took was putting a little faith in him, trusting his word and his intentions. Castiel is overcome with love for him. There may be some residual reactivity from his body’s memories of the trauma it experienced, but his heart and soul believe in Dean. Soon his body will, too.

“God, I love you, Cas,” Dean whispers against his cheek.

“I love you, Dean,” Castiel answers, then pushes the sheets to the bottom of the bed and reverses himself. He licks a stripe the length of Dean’s cock and makes him moan. “Anytime you’re ready,” Castiel smirks, peeking up at him.
“Cocky. No pun intended,” Dean jokes.

Castiel twists his mouth and eyes him dubiously but affectionately. “That pun was totally intended.”

“Yeah, you got me,” Dean laughs. Castiel watches him as his eyes flick to his penis. He encourages his boyfriend by wrapping his lips around Dean’s cock and gently sucking at it. A moment later, Dean slides his mouth around Castiel for the first time.

Castiel trembles and his mouth opens at the welcome sensation. It’s been so, so long, and even longer since it felt good. A deep groan escapes his throat as he drops his head to the mattress; he involuntarily thrusts his hips when he feels Dean’s tongue tickle the slit of his cockhead. An enthusiastic hum answers him, which only adds to the pleasure he didn’t expect to feel, and he pushes in again. Dean is a man on a mission then, licking and sucking and humming. Castiel loses himself in the moment, breathing through any momentary discomfort and letting it go like a leaf floating down a stream. The rushing water rises and becomes wider and stronger until the little leaves of panic barely have time to appear before they’re whisked away, and soon they don’t appear at all. He feels himself being swept away, riding the current of pleasure until oh God I need to reciprocate, don’t I? floats into his hazy brain. Castiel cups his boyfriend’s scrotum with one hand and grips his ass with the other as he swallows his lover’s perfect cock. It’s glorious being with Dean like this, hearing and feeling his joyful cries and answering with his own, two people perfectly reflecting each other. He doesn’t last much longer after that. Clinging onto Dean’s legs, he arches back and cries out as he comes in Dean’s mouth. The endorphins race through his body and make him shiver. His head drops as he pants through the aftershocks of the blowjob that just rocked him to the core. When he returns to his body (having left because the moment was transcendent, not to escape), Dean is gazing at him warmly as he runs his fingers up and down his thigh. He opens his mouth to say something, but Castiel takes all of his words away as he sucks him down—a proper and adequate response, he thinks. Dean’s salty-bitter release fills his mouth moments later.

“Babe,” Dean gasps. “Sweetheart.” He mops his brow. “How… how are you? Do you know what you did? I didn’t expect you to, you know, let me, while you weren’t on me...”

Castiel crawls up the bed until he is face-to-face with his boyfriend once again. “Night of surprises, remember?” he grins. He’s overcome by the power of the soul sunshine in Dean’s smile. “We were both surprised,” Castiel admits softly. “But I’m fine. Really. I feel great.”

Dean gently wraps his arms around him, cocooning him in feelings of love and safety he thought he’d never feel again. He feels so good, so right with Dean and the life they’ll live together. He still has fears, but he knows he can live bravely, and knows it will be even easier to live bravely with Dean by his side. Castiel is changing. Dean is changing. They’re creating a new life together, their second chance. He doesn’t want anything in their way.

“I have one more surprise for you,” Castiel says.

Chapter End Notes

Until Friday, my lovelies. <3

The song Cas sings to Dean is “Lean on Me” by Bill Withers.
Chapter Notes

Ah, the surprise... and a whole lot more, too. <3

Warning for brief references to Cas’ abuse. All events have already been described previously.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m divorcing April.”

Mia purses her lips and nods. “This is a development. Tell me how you came to this decision.”

Castiel shifts in his seat, leaning back and folding a leg under himself. “I’ve thought about it a lot, and I’m just tired of being afraid, tired of feeling like she rules my life. I know there is potential for danger, but I have to do this in order to have my life back, to be free. I have to try, at least.”

“I see. How does it feel?”


“Sounds like the way you would’ve described your relationship with Dean at one point,” she smiles.

“You’re right. I guess the things that are worth doing are like that.”

“I agree.” She sips her tea delicately. “So how will this work? I know you’ve had some reservations about the process.”

“Chuck referred me to a great lawyer in New York. He’s filed all the paperwork on my behalf, and they’re keeping my address confidential because of the abuse. He thinks I’ll probably have to appear in court at least once, based on the grounds I’m using for the divorce, but he’s going to try to get me out of as many appearances as he can.”

“I see. On what grounds are you requesting the divorce? Irretrievable breakdown?”

Castiel understands why she made the assumption. “No.” He breathes deeply, then answers, “Cruel and inhuman treatment.”

Mia sits back in her seat, clearly stunned. Castiel can’t blame her. He’d never wanted to talk about it, never wanted it to be in the public record, never wanted to lay it out for the court. Never before, anyway. “I have to say I’m having a reaction here, Castiel. I’m very surprised.”

“I figured you would be,” he says with a tiny smile. “It’s all part of the work, though. I’ve kept so many secrets for so long. It’s time to be done with that.” He glances out the window at the sunny day. Snow is melting off the roof, dripping onto the branches of the tree. “Dean told me once that every time I didn’t keep secrets, things got better. He was right, and I feel like things will get even better for me once I let this all out.”
She smiles at him, looking proud. “Being able to say your truth is part of healing,” she says.

“Yes. I used to be so ashamed of what happened to me, thinking it was some sort of fault or flaw in me that made it happen or some sort of punishment. But I didn’t make her hit me or choke me or”—he swallows through a constricted throat—“sexually assault me, or say horrible things. Those were all choices she made, and I think it’s time to place the blame where it belongs. My fear and the things I did to protect myself were normal human reactions to trauma. I did the best I could at the time. And now I’m doing the best I can again, except that my best is a little better than it used to be. That’s thanks to you and Dean and my family and the babies at the hospital and the other people I let into my life.”

Mia leans forward and peers into his eyes. “And you, Castiel. Mostly you.”

“Yes, and me. Mostly me. I worked very hard to get here. I made choices that led me to my own healing.”

“You know what I’ve noticed most about you in the last few months?” she asks with a small smile. “I’ve noticed your thinking patterns shift. I’ve noticed you talking about the future with hope and faith in the beauty of that future. I’ve noticed your body relax, and I’ve noticed that you smile and you don’t look around so much. And you know what’s really striking? I’ve noticed that you don’t put the same emphasis on her anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“Her presence in your life was palpable. You sat as if she would pop out at any moment. All of your day-to-day life was focused on her. You even used to enunciate her name or even her pronoun if you were talking about her, like, ‘I had a dream about her last night.’ That’s all stopped.”

Castiel fiddles with his teacup as he ponders her words. She’s right. She used to take up so much space in his head and his life, and he did put that kind of emphasis on her. Now, she barely creeps into his periphery. A smile spreads slowly on his lips. “Wow,” he says.

“Wow,” she agrees.

Castiel leaves the office with that smile still on his face. He breathes in the smell of melting snow and mud. The air is cool, of course, but at this time of the year anything above freezing feels heavenly. Maybe he’ll go for a run outside with Sully. Maybe he can get Cleo to wear a tiny leash. He smiles wider at the unlikely idea before he gets in his SUV and drives to the hospital.

It’s been a week since he made the surprise announcement to Dean that he’s divorcing April. Dean had been thrilled, but scared for him, too, and they spent a good amount of time that night crying and talking and holding each other. He told Dean that his lawyer had her served on her birthday, and Dean laughed his ass off about it. Castiel admits he felt a little evil glee about that, too. The next couple of days had been fantastic (their time together spent working and snuggling and indulging in simultaneous blowjobs), and then Dean had to go back for a race in Indianapolis. He came back the very next night after his race, though, and for a very good reason: Dean gets to spend this entire week at home because they have a break between races. They’re both excited about it. It’ll be the first time Dean’s been home for so long at the house they’re now sharing.

“Hey, dear heart,” he greets his boyfriend when they meet at the entrance. They hug and plant kisses on each other’s cheeks. “Good breakfast with Sam?”

“Awesome,” Dean grins. “Let’s go hold some babies.” Dean recently passed his background checks so he could volunteer. The joy on his face is irrepressible.
“If there are any to hold today,” Castiel reminds him. They make their way down the familiar halls to the neonatal unit, where they greet Hannah. She leads them to the room and there are, indeed, two babies on the unit. Castiel removes his sweater and unbuttons his shirt, thrilled that he no longer has to cover his old tattoo with tape and gauze just in case his open shirt shifted. He settles down with a baby named Kameela and Dean settles in with Mason, and if Castiel thought Dean was beautiful before, it’s nothing compared to this.

Dean’s large arms create a basket of sorts, a perfect, snug spot for baby Mason. He’s crooning a song softly to him, punctuating it with little strokes of his hands or face or hair. His entire being lights up when Mason looks his way (either accidentally or because of the rooting reflex Dean activates when he touches his cheek), sending a pleasant shiver through Castiel’s body. He’s made to be a father, Castiel thinks. His nurturing nature is well-suited to the task. Castiel once thought he might like to be a father someday, too. He was even a little excited about becoming a father when April said she was pregnant, even if he didn’t want to be with her. Thank God that never came to be, because as much as he longed for it he proved himself unworthy of the task, not even able to protect a dog. You protected Apollo. You left. You assured his safety. He shakes the negative thoughts out of his head. Apparently, despite how far he’s come, he still has some work to do. Still stumbling my way to change. Dean interrupts his thoughts.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Castiel answers. He readjusts Kameela so he can look up at Dean.

“Do you, ah… Do you do this because of your babies?”

“My babies?”

“Yeah. You know, the ones that she…” He doesn’t finish his thought, but he knows what Dean is getting at.

“Oh. Um, no. I’m fairly certain she was never pregnant at all.”

“Oh.”

Castiel rubs circles onto the baby’s back. “I started this because I was isolating myself so much that Mia was concerned about my lack of human connection. She wanted me to find ways to incorporate human touch into my life. This was the best way I could think of. I knew they couldn’t harm me, and since we were in a hospital I knew there were others to make sure that they were protected in case I couldn’t protect them. It’s really enriched my life.”

Dean is quiet for a while. Finally, he asks, “Do you think you want kids someday?”

“I don’t really know if I should,” he answers. “I still have doubts about my ability to protect them.”

Dean’s eyes rove over him and Kameela tenderly. “I don’t have any doubts. Not at all. You know that’s old stuff, right?”

“I know. It’s hard to shake the guilt, though.”

“But you’re working on it, right? We have Cleo now and she’s doing great. You take care of her so well. And think about how well you’ve done with the babies here. Hannah looks at you like you’re an angel of the Lord or something, and she wouldn’t have that opinion if you weren’t doing well with the babies.”

“I suppose.”
“Agree to revisit the topic someday?”

Castiel takes in Dean’s hopeful, faithful face. That hope and faith is placed in him. It’s humbling. “Keep asking,” he answers. Dean’s smile is so bright, Castiel is surprised the babies don’t wake up from it. He closes his eyes and savorsthe feeling of the baby in his arms and the love in his heart.

A few days later, after a busy week meeting with new customers (alone, imagine that!) and toiling in the workshop (the work doesn’t stop just because Dean’s home, especially since Chuck keeps referring people to him to help him restart his business), Castiel decides the weekend is the perfect time to focus on them. “So, we haven’t been out on a date or spent time with our friends in a while, so I thought maybe we could combine the two. We can spend time with our friends, and later tonight… you’re mine.” Dean’s wiggling tells him he’s pleased about that.

Castiel instructs his boyfriend to dress nicely even though he usually prefers more casual wear, and he is not sorry for that at all when Dean comes out of their bedroom in dress pants that accentuate his glutes and a jacket that’s straining at his broad shoulders. A blue and red striped tie is knotted around his neck. Staying at home is looking very tempting right now. “You look incredible,” Castiel murmurs against Dean’s lips.

“Mmm, same to you,” Dean purrs. “You know, we could stay home…”

“Don’t tempt me,” Castiel laughs. “Come on.”

They meet their friends for an early dinner, seated in an out-of-the-way spot that he’d requested for the quietness so they could hear each other. Castiel realizes it’s the first time they’ve all gone out somewhere together. He used to do this quite a bit when he was younger. He looks around at the happy crowd and realizes that he feels relaxed. He hasn’t looked around vigilantly. He hasn’t wondered about his friends’ motivations. He trusts them. They have been part of his healing, too. Thinking about everything that’s brought him to this point, he smiles and leans back in his chair, just watching everyone have a good time and happy to be a part of it. Dean notices (of course) and eyes him curiously, the corners of his mouth turned up in both question and affection. Castiel leans into him and plants his mouth onto his, keeping it firmly rooted there for several deep breaths, before separating slowly. “Love you,” he says before turning his attention to their friends, whose attentions are already on them. “Um, I have a question for all of you,” he says. “A favor, actually.”

“Ask away. You know we’ll do anything we can for you,” Jess says warmly. Sam nods his agreement next to him. Castiel feels so fortunate to have them. Despite them knowing more than he probably cared for them to know about some very intimate problems he’d had, he considers them his closest friends.

“Well, we will need someone to care for Cleo when we go to New York, probably in May or June. I can let you know the dates more specifically as we get closer. It depends on when the court hearing is.”

“Court? Who’s in trouble?” Benny jokes, making everyone laugh.

“My soon-to-be-ex wife,” Castiel says with a spark of pride. “I’m finally divorcing her.”

There are varied reactions to the news — all happy, but some more surprised than others since not everyone knew he’s married. Charlie is the most vocal about her surprise.

“What the frack? You’re married?”

“I should explain,” Castiel says. And with a deep breath, a supportive shoulder squeeze from Sam,
and Dean holding his hand, he does. It’s hard, and his eyes well up at points, but he does it anyway. When he’s done, his friends gaze at him quietly with soft eyes. Castiel isn’t really sure what to do next, but Charlie takes care of that for him.

“Stand up, I need to hug you, damn it,” she demands tearfully. He does, and she wraps herself around him in an embrace that warms him inside and out. Jess, Donna, Benny, Andrea, Sam, and Dean follow suit, and Castiel feels like the gooey center of a (vegan) cinnamon roll, sweet and warm and surrounded by goodness. “And I wanna see your tattoo!” Charlie’s muffled voice cries against his shoulder. Everyone laughs and separates. Castiel smiles.

“In the bathroom,” he says.

And that is how eight adults end up jammed into one “family” restroom, all of his friends admiring the artwork on Castiel’s back and talking animatedly and Dean by his side. He feels right with these people. He feels whole and good. He feels like himself.

***

Cas surprised the shit out of him tonight (he’s been doing that a lot lately, in all the best ways). Cas, the man who barely said boo to anybody once upon a time, went out in public with their friends, told his story (the abridged version) to them, and showed them his tattoo. He’s so fucking proud of his boyfriend. And Cas looks especially hot tonight. Maybe it’s the way his outfit hugs him and reveals just a peek of skin around his neck, where his collar is unbuttoned and he is sans tie (Dean grimaced at the reminder when Cas explained why), but most likely it’s the way he’s been smiling and interacting so confidently. Gone is the hypervigilance of months ago, replaced by a confidence that he connects with like an old friend. He guesses this is sort of how Cas used to be. This Cas, though, is older and much wiser, and his confidence reflects that. It’s new but setting deep roots that will last a lifetime, like a sapling. Most people don’t marvel at a sapling, but most don’t see everything it took for that sapling to develop from seed. God, he wants him. Why do they have to be at a dumb play?

But at a dumb play they are. Ordinarily he wouldn’t mind; he likes theater. They’re seeing a performance of Damn Yankees, which with all the baseball stuff and soul-selling is pretty fun. But Cas is right there and he smells like pine and ocean and he just wants to bury his face in his neck and… other areas.

“Are you alright?” Cas whispers. Dean is leaning into him, inhaling his scent. Whoops. He didn’t realize his thoughts had translated into action.

“Fine,” Dean says, straightening up and fixing Cas’ collar. “Sorry.”

Cas shoots him an amused look and turns his attention back to the show. Dean tries to, as well. He’s a mature adult who can act maturely in mature situations such as this. But this isn’t all that mature. It’s community theater. You just need to be able to sit down and shut up for two hours. Teenagers can do that. This activity is rated T for Teen. Dean snickers quietly at his own joke. What I want is an activity that’s rated M for Mature. He lets his mind wander to Cas’ hands, which he imagines wandering all over him. He pictures him tugging his hair… pinching his nipples… slowly opening him up with those nimble fingers while holding his hands above his head so he can just surrender…

“Can I borrow your jacket, Dean?” Cas whispers. He has his draped over himself already, like he’s cold.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” he says. He wriggles it from where it’s pinned under him. Cas smiles as he takes
it and drapes it over the both of them, then snuggles into Dean’s side. Dean snuggles back, starting to become concerned that Cas is getting sick until he feels those nimble fingers sliding along the length of his dick over his increasingly-tighter pants. He glances at Cas out of the corner of his eye, but Cas’ eyes are focused on the show. Does he realize what he’s doing? Dean sits for a moment, pressing his lips together and breathing as calmly as he can, a task that is becoming more difficult by the second. The pressure increases ever so slightly, and a suspicious Dean turns to look more closely at his boyfriend and sees what he didn’t see before: Cas is watching the show, but there’s mischief in his face that doesn’t fit with what’s happening on stage (Dean thinks it doesn’t, anyway; truthfully, he’s not paying attention). He notices that Cas’ jacket has crumpled into his lap and he’s made no move to fix it, and the arm not currently attached to the hand that’s driving Dean crazy seems to be doing its own thing in the vicinity of Cas’ lap. Dean clears his throat quietly and inhales deeply, then takes a chance and slides his hand under Cas’ jacket to his crotch, where he does indeed find something occupying the space. He glides his fingers lightly over his lover’s hand; in response, Cas snuggles a little closer, removing his hand from his own crotch and pressing Dean’s onto it, then moving his hand onto the top of his jacket as if he is adjusting it due to feeling chilled. They sit this way until intermission, which is just a few minutes later, thank God. Dean really didn’t want to have to explain how his pants got wet (which definitely would’ve happened had they gone any longer).

“What do you think of the show, guys?” Charlie asks brightly, leaning over several of their friends.

“It’s really great, but I’m a little worried about Cas here,” Dean says, placing a supportive arm around his shoulders. “He’s been cozying up to me and covering himself with our jackets. I think he’s coming down with something.” He frowns in (fake) concern at Cas. “Do you want to go home, sweetheart?”

“It’s up to you. I don’t want to take you away from the show if you want to stay. I was just warming up.”

*Warming up? The little sneak.* “Hey, you know you’re my top priority. I think I need to get you into bed.” He just barely keeps from grinning.

“Alright.” Cas turns to say good night, and they all wish him well. Jess peers at Dean, who’s doing his best to avoid eye contact with her. No such luck, because she walks up to him anyway.

“Warming up? Get him into bed?” Jess whispers in his ear. “Get the fuck out of here, you liars.” She pulls away from his ear with a fond smirk. She hugs Cas and must say something similar, because he chuckles quietly and says he’s sure Dean will take *very* good care of him.

They are quiet as Dean steers Cas out of the theater and toward the parking garage. Cas peers around him, but no more than most people do walking down the street in the dark. When they reach Cas’ SUV and shut and lock the doors behind them, Dean can stay quiet no longer. Cas must know it, because he’s sporting a wide, proud-of-himself grin. “Dude, I am *not* complaining, but what was that? ‘Cause if I did anything to make that happen, I’m gonna keep doing it.”

Cas shrugs. “I used to be a little bolder with my dates sometimes. Just wanted to try it again. Plus I haven’t really been able to spend as much time with you so far as I’d like, since we’ve both been so tired from work and whatnot.” He leans over the center console. “I’ve *really* missed you.”

Dean meets him in the middle of the console. “I’ve missed you,” he says before locking their tongues together in a frantic tangle. Their “warm up” has thoroughly stoked Dean’s fire; if he thought Cas would agree, he’d take him in the backseat and show Cas just how *top* a priority he is. “Wanna go home so I can get you into bed?” he murmurs.
Cas smiles against his lips. “Mmm. I’d very much like to be your top... priority.”

Oh ho, he understood that reference, and he’s on board. “I will pay every speeding ticket you get from here to home. Just get us there,” Dean says urgently. Cas laughs and turns the key.

At home, they’re on each other immediately but are slowed briefly by Cleo, who demands attention. “Why don’t I take care of her while you get ready for bed?” Cas suggests. The deeper, hotter suggestion is behind his eyes, and Dean is not ashamed to say he runs like a bat out of hell to follow it.

Cas joins him in the shower several minutes later; they make out under the pounding droplets and get water in their eyes and Dean loves it. Cas dries himself perfunctorily but takes his time with Dean, standing to his side in front of the mirrored vanity; Dean watches Cas watch himself slide the plush towel and his hands over Dean’s skin and gets incredibly aroused by Cas’ arousal.

“Fuck,” Dean murmurs, staring at Cas’ baby blues in the mirror. “Unless you want this to end in the next thirty seconds, we should slow down and take this to the bedroom.”

“There’s a big mirror there, too, you know,” Cas purrs in his ear.

“Caaaas,” Dean whines. Cas takes mercy on him and drops the towel, then leads him to their bedroom. He sprinkles kisses all along Dean’s jaw, collarbone, and chest, then presses on his shoulders gently with his hands, a suggestion rather than a demand. Dean takes it and lowers himself to the bed, tugging Cas’ hips in the same sort of gentle suggestion. Cas follows, straddling Dean’s hips. He knots their tongues together as his hands roam Dean’s body, just as Dean had imagined in the theater earlier. Dean leans back until they’re both lying across the flannel sheets. He shoves the comforter and other blankets to the foot of the bed while dragging himself toward the top. Cas follows, never letting go of his lips. Dean lets his hands wander, too, and Cas moans into his touches. The feeling of trust Cas is placing in him right now is heady. Cas is intoxicating, completely confident, and Dean wonders if he could ask him for what he was thinking of earlier, if Cas would help him let go. His retirement, what he’ll do next, Cas’ divorce... all have been weighing on his mind. He could use the release, the surrender. But he shouldn’t, he thinks. He shouldn’t ask for that, because Cas has things on his mind, too. Cas needs him, too. And though he did seem open to topping, he’s not sure whether that was just banter.

“Earth to Dean,” Cas says affectionately. “What are you thinking about?”

“Huh?”

“You’re not supposed to be thinking right now,” he teases.

“Sorry. Just... thinking.” Yes, Dean. Obviously. He rolls his eyes at himself internally, but Cas makes no comment on it.

“About?”

“I, uh. Just, um, you know. Stuff.”

“I hope that ‘stuff’ is about all of the things you’d like me to do to you,” he says, pressing a kiss into the hollow under his ear, which he knows damn well does things to him.

“Oh, yeah, actually,” he says before his brain can censor his mouth. You weren’t supposed to say that. That’s it — interviews for a new carrier pigeon will commence tomorrow at nine.

“Well then... how can I help you lose your mind? What do you need?” Cas kisses his way across his jaw until their eyes are aligned. He is sincere, Dean knows. He is sincere and he loves him, and
they are for each other and they’ll work it out if it gets too overwhelming for Cas and Cas wants him to ask for things for himself and it’s not fair that he does all this work on himself and Dean keeps avoiding it… Dean takes a deep, brave breath.

“I need… I don’t know if you can do this, but I need to get out of my head, you know? I need you to take over completely and… I don’t know, make me let go.”

A soft tenderness overtakes Cas’ face; Dean is overcome by the love he feels in his boyfriend’s eyes. “Baby,” he whispers, cupping his face and kissing him sweetly. He takes Dean’s hands and holds them as he kisses every inch he can reach. “I’ll help you,” he says. Dean believes him, but worries, too. Will this trigger something for him? Will Dean’s greed make things worse?

Cas does, indeed, help him, but in the most unexpected ways. He passes firm strokes over his muscles, prompting them to lengthen and let go of the tension held within them. He reassures Dean several times that he feels incredible and strong and good and that he is not being triggered in any way, which Dean didn’t know he needed to hear so badly but he really did, and it makes him feel so much more relaxed. He holds his hands down, but gently and only until Dean keeps them still on his own. When Cas’ hands disappear and Dean whines for more, Cas says, “You have to be able to relax yourself, Dean, not rely on others to make you do it. It’s a conscious decision to have power over yourself, to give yourself permission to love and treat yourself well and let yourself have what you need.” And shit, Dean had never thought of it that way. It makes sense, and when he gives himself permission to just receive and not feel like he has to take care of someone else, it feels distinctly different and utterly wonderful. That freedom, that permission he gives himself… it’s power over himself, power to allow himself to at least ask for things he wants. It makes him brave enough to ask, “Cas, will you… will you fu—” He swallows and tries again, “Will you make love to me? I really want to feel you in me, if you’re comfortable.”

Cas’ eyes sparkle. “Yes. I would love to try. I love you, dear heart.”

Dean can’t say anything else for fear that he will shatter into a million shiny pieces of light.

Cas preps him expertly. Clearly, though he admits he’s rusty, he remembers how and has some fucking skills (or fucking skills, he giggles to himself). Dean tells Cas he’s ready and sees the first hint of hesitation he’s seen all night. “Can I face you, love? I don’t know if I can… from behind, yet. I’m not sure.”

Every fiber of his heart flutters wildly at the trust and vulnerability Cas is sharing with him. “Yes. Anything. I trust you to take care of me and yourself.” He doesn’t know where the words came from, especially in his love-drunk stupor when he can barely string a thought together. Perhaps it’s because they’re from a place of truth so deep within him that he doesn’t need to think about them. They exist on their own.

His boyfriend pushes into him slowly. Cas coaches himself a bit and Dean reassures him, and Dean worries and Cas reassures him. They both take slow, steadying breaths and laugh quietly when they are seated together fully and perfectly. Cas collapses onto Dean’s chest for a moment, burying himself into Dean’s neck. Dean wraps his arms around him and cards his thick fingers through his hair until Cas returns to him, face red but smiling. “Ready to let go?” he asks. Dean nods.

Immediately, Cas sets a pace that is soft in its intention but hard in its intensity. He thrusts into Dean vigorously; Dean feels like the wood in Cas’ workshop that he works over with skill, purpose, and a confident hand, both loving and intent on a certain outcome. Cas is taking care of Dean, and Dean, in giving himself over so completely to him, is taking care of Cas, too. Cas needs to feel potent yet safe, Dean needs to feel nurturing yet nurtured, and they both need to love and be
loved. Check, check, and…

“Cas! Oh God!” Dean yells as he comes suddenly. Cas is crying out to God just a moment later as he fills Dean. His sweetheart finding his release and his power in Dean is too much. He hides his face in Cas’ neck as they tremble and gasp for air. He feels Cas’ hot breath on his ear and wonders if Cas is feeling the same way he is, overwhelmed and completely in awe.

After several minutes, Cas cleans them up and climbs back into bed. Dean watches and waits. Cas takes his hand and kisses him softly. “I love you,” he says simply. The rest he says with his eyes, a squeeze of his hand, and the way he lies nude on his stomach to go to sleep, something he’s never done before.

“Love you,” Dean says, a little choked up. He presses a kiss to his boyfriend’s brow, then turns off the light and settles next to him. Cleo jumps on the bed and settles at their heads.

Chapter End Notes

So, did you like the surprise? :)

You may have noticed that I added a number to the chapter count—this one will be done in a couple of weeks. I’ll get mushy at the end, but let me just say now that this has been a joy to share with you. <3

Next chapter: events of significance.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s a big day. His last race.

In late April, at a press conference just before the race at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Massachusetts, he announced his upcoming retirement with his family and friends in attendance:

“It is with great pride in what I have accomplished and excitement for what’s next that I announce my retirement, effective after the last Monster Energy Supercross event in Las Vegas next month.

“I have been racing since I was 16 years old. I started it as a way to do something for myself and to get away from potentially bad influences I was starting to fall into as a teen, and I fell in love with it. In racing I found a home and I found a confidence in myself that I’d been seeking. I have worked hard in the sport and I climbed to the top. The view’s been great from up there, but being so high up I could also see some other things I’d been ignoring.

“After my injury last year, I had a lot of time to reflect. I had time at home with my family and time to take a break from the grueling schedule and pace I was putting my body through. Also during that time, I met the person I want to spend my life with. So I could tell you that I’m retiring because I want to quit while I’m on top, but really, I just want to be home with him and my family, and I want to do other things with my life now.

“Racing has given me so much, and I’m sure I’ll stay involved somehow, at least as a fan if not more. I am grateful to my fans, to my team and sponsors, to my coach, and to my family, friends, and my boyfriend, who’s given me the strength to move on. Thank you all for a fantastic experience, a fantastic career."

Today, he’s gearing up for his final run as a professional racer. Dean thinks it’s rather fitting that it’s in Las Vegas again, where he started the road trip with Cas that led to them dating and everything that came after. Seems like it’s a good place to start new things, at least for him. Cas is with him today, as are his parents, Sam and Jess, and Gabe and Kali, whose support makes Dean really feel like a part of Cas’ family. Eddie is here, too. His team is both giving him shit and wishing him well, which feels right. Last night, they celebrated together. Tonight, he’ll celebrate quietly with Cas and their family.

“’Bout time you move over for me, old man,” Poppy jokes.

“Good thing I am, ’cause you never would’ve made it to the top with me still here,” he jokes back. Poppy’s a good kid. He reminds Dean a lot of himself.

“Yeah, you’re right about that,” Poppy acknowledges.

“Hey, look,” Dean says with a friendly grip of his shoulder, “you’re doing great, kid. You have what it takes if you want it. Call me anytime, alright?”

“Thanks, man. Good luck out there.”

Dean dresses and heads out to see his bike for her last professional run. “Hey, Val,” he murmurs, short for Valentine. She’s red and white and he considers her his baby, too, but he certainly couldn’t call her Baby. That would’ve been wrong. “Big day today, girl. Last one. But don’t you
worry, I’ll still take you out and work ya. I know you wouldn’t want to stay locked up in some garage. Girl like you needs to be out there eatin’ mud.” He grins and caresses her seat. “Alright. Let’s do it.” He rolls his shoulders and stretches his muscles, breathing in dirt and exhaust as bikes are prepped for their runs.

The crowd is huge and supportive today. He thinks he sees signs with his name on them, and he’s pretty sure he hears his name being chanted as he takes his place on his bike. He waves to the crowd, then focuses his attention fully on the track.

As the race begins, Dean feels a mix of lightness and fierce competition. He wants to win—he always wants to win if he can—but today he feels like he can enjoy it, knowing there won’t be more demands made on him tomorrow to perform better than today. He takes the turns and jumps almost effortlessly (although the twinge in his left knee reminds him that it’s probably good that he’s retiring now before his body is wrecked). He is one with the track. Random snippets of SpongeBob SquarePants episodes the other guys watch on their off time (okay, he does too) fly through his head—the sponge’s little “On the Road” song and his “Focus on the road… there is nothing but the road” mantra repeat on a loop as he comes toward the end of his run. It’s utterly ridiculous stuff, and he laughs out loud and whoops as he flies to a finish that felt fun, something he hasn’t felt about his work in a while. By the time the event is over, Dean feels great about his finish—first—and about his decision to be done. He takes a last lap to thank his fans, then entrusts Val to her handlers and accepts his winnings. He says a few words to the crowd and the media, then leaves to embrace his family away from film crews and cameras — Cas first, then his dad, mom, Sam, Jess, Kali, and Gabe, who gives him a longer, more heartfelt hug than he expects. He knows how much all of them have been through to be here for him, from having to take time off from work (all of them) to flying (his dad hates it as much as he does) to being around so many people (it’s still not Cas’ favorite thing), and he’s so grateful. He can’t wait to celebrate with all of them.

They accompany Dean to the changing area and wait while he says goodbye to everyone one more time. Hugs, slaps on the back (and ass — male athletes, ha), and well-wishes are traded. He drags in his family to say hello. The guys are polite, probably because his mother is there, although they do rib him about his “swooning” over his boyfriend. It makes Cas blush and his mother crack a small, fond smile. She’s come around. After Christmas, Cas started calling her weekly about this or that, usually about how Dean was doing after he’d come home to visit, and eventually they found some common interests beyond Dean and have formed their own relationship. Dean still marvels at his forgiving nature and how well things have turned out when they started so badly. He thinks his mom does, too. Just the other day she commented that she’s glad that Dean is so happy and that Cas seems “really good” for him, and that she enjoys talking with him. “He wants the best for you, honey,” his mom said, as if Dean didn’t know. “I’m glad you found him. He’s a good man.” Dean couldn’t agree more.

They have a hearty dinner in a private room at Panevino, an Italian place with a view of the Strip. Dean is starving after his race, so he and Cas share hummus rolls and then he shares fried calamari with his dad because no one else likes the stuff and his dad wouldn’t order it otherwise (he’s self-sacrificing like that, just like Dean). Cas feathers his hair with a fond, comforting smile (he seems to know that Dean still gets a little uncomfortable eating animal products around him). Cas orders the “Ricotta” and Spinach Dumplings and Dean orders a Vegetable Burger, not out of guilt but because it sounds good. They talk and laugh a lot. Everyone wants to hit some of the casinos except for Dean and Cas, who are too tired and want to head back to their room. “Too tired, sure,” Gabe jokes with a smile. He grins back, letting Gabe think what he wants — but truth be told, he really is exhausted.

“Do you want to fool around?” Dean asks Cas when they’re back in their room, just in case Cas is
in the mood. He is tired, yes, but even when he’s on his deathbed, he’ll still want to have sex with Cas if Cas wants to.

“I love you, but I could sleep for ten years right now,” Cas says, rubbing his face. “Raincheck?”

“Thank God,” Dean groans before he collapses face-first onto the bed. Cas does the same.

“Why did you ask if you didn’t want to?” Cas asks him in a muffled voice.

“Ain’t just about me. Besides, I figure I should have sex with you as often as possible.”

He feels Cas take his hand. “Dean.” Dean turns his head to see Cas’ face. “If you don’t want to have sex, whatever your reason, we don’t. I, of all people, understand.”

Dean stiffens. He didn’t mean to imply that Cas would ever force him into anything. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know. I’m just making it clear. As far as having sex with me as often as possible... Do you think the well is going to dry up?”

Shit. Open mouth, insert foot.

Uh, no, I just… I don’t know what I meant. I guess I just meant that having sex with you is good and I want to do it as much as possible. Not that that’s all we’re about, but, you know.”

“I would understand if you’re afraid of that. The well drying up.”

Dean nods. Of course he would. “I’m not,” he assures him

“I’m afraid of it sometimes.”

“You are?”

“Mmm. It’s irrational, I think, but it’s there. I get these thoughts that I’d better enjoy it while it lasts, because inevitably I will fail.”

Dean sees a flicker of sadness in his boyfriend’s eyes. He slides a finger down Cas’ stubbly face. “You know I wouldn’t leave you, don’t you? I don’t think things are gonna dry up, but if they do, I’m not leaving.”

Cas offers him a small, tired smile. “Thank you, dear heart.”

Dean kisses him without any goal other than to comfort him. They fall asleep in their clothes with the lights on, wrapped in each other’s arms.

Dean wakes first, which he always loves because it’s a reminder that Cas trusts him completely. He lays a peck on his forehead before detangling himself and heading to the bathroom.

“Shut up and put your money where your mouth is, that’s what you get for waking up in Vegas!” he sings as he fills the sink to shave. After four or five passes of the razor, Cas joins him, quietly wrapping his naked body around Dean’s from behind. He’s never done that before. They’ve avoided it during the times they’ve had penetrative sex—at least once every time he was home in the last month and a half, he remembers with delight—so Dean wonders what’s going on in Cas’ head. He holds one of Cas’ arms with one of his as he tries to shave one-handed. Cas gently moves his arms away and glides his hands along Dean’s ribs while pressing into his back and… his ass with… Dean gulps and Cas mouths wetly at the nape of his neck before moving away and
climbing into the shower. He looks down at his very hard dick. “Fuck,” he mumbles to himself. He quickly finishes shaving and joins his hot boyfriend.

Said boyfriend muckles onto him as soon as he closes the curtain, which is fine with him. He gives Dean the hotel soap and asks, “Wash me?”

_Hell yes! _Dean’s brain sings (with his dick providing backup). He takes the soap and smooths it over every inch of skin on the front of Cas’ body. Before Dean can wonder whether he should ask, Cas turns and offers his back. Dean whimpers and soaps up his hands, then slides them along his shoulders, the branches and trunk on his back, the globes of his ass, and his legs. Cas drags Dean’s hands around his middle until Dean has no choice but to follow and press into Cas’ back, the same sort of motion he’d done to Dean when he was at the sink. Dean panics for a moment because his erection is resting against Cas’ ass, but he can feel Cas breathing into whatever feelings are coming up for him. Clearly, Cas knows what he’s doing and he’s doing it on purpose, so Dean simply follows his lead. Cas’ muscles relax under Dean’s hands; a surge of admiration shivers through him. Cas is always challenging himself, making himself face his fears. He’s met hundreds of people who take their lives into their own hands with daring feats. Until his retirement, one could’ve said the same about him. But he’s never met anyone as brave as Cas.

Cas turns and gestures for the soap, then lathers Dean up in the same way that Dean did for him. When he’s satisfied, he leans against his back and holds him, then starts to thrust gently between Dean’s legs. Cas isn’t penetrating him, but Dean still feels like he’s going to paint the shower wall with how hot it is. He knows this is another step for Cas, a way to work out whatever is happening in his mind, and he wants it to be nothing but pleasurable. Dean squeezes his legs together to make a tighter channel for him, and Cas pauses, then groans. As Cas works, Dean takes himself in hand. Their pleasure builds and eventually bursts, painting the wall as well as Dean’s legs and the tub. Cas rests against him for some time, which is fine by Dean because he can barely move himself.

“One of these days it’ll be my turn,” Cas murmurs before pressing Dean in one last hug. Dean smiles, any fears draining like the bubbles swirling near their feet.

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Things have dried up.

Just after they got back from Vegas, his lawyer called to give Castiel a heads-up about the court date in June and told him he had to show up. Both Castiel and his attorney had hoped she was just going to ignore the summons and he could get a default judgment, but she ended up responding (at the last minute, of course) and it became a contested divorce. Castiel is certain she waited on purpose, just to fuck with him. And fuck with him she did. He’s an irritable, stressed-out mess now that he knows the exact date he has to face her again. He doesn’t blame Michael — he knows his attorney has done everything possible to help Castiel avoid court, and he’s won all of those battles up until now. He blames her, like he should have all along. He knows she’s manipulative, and because of that he knew facing her would be inevitable. There’s a part of him that wants the opportunity to face his abuser. The rest of him, though, would prefer to forget about her existence, thank you very much. The anxiety of facing her again almost makes him want to forget the whole thing. Almost. But he won’t, because he needs this, and Dean needs this. The stress, though, is taking its toll.

“This sucks,” he admits bluntly to Mia.

“Yes. We knew it probably would.”

“Yes, I know. I really thought I’d be better at handling this.”
Castiel, having an emotional reaction to a very traumatic time in your life that you’re revisiting is uncomfortable, and it’s also perfectly reasonable and even to be expected. The reactions you’re having don’t negate the two years of work you’ve done or the progress you’ve made.”

Castiel sighs and scratches his fingers through his hair. “Thank you. I know. I’m just feeling really fucking negative right now. Dean has been so wonderful and I’ve been such a grouch. I haven’t wanted to do anything at all — sexually, socially, nothing. He’s been so patient. This isn’t the fucking way I wanted to start our lives together. He’s home for good, finally, and I’ve been nothing but a pathetic lump. I made so much fucking progress. I was ready, Mia. Sex was so good. The first time he trusted me to make love to him I was so grateful and happy and ready, and every time after that got better and better. When we got home after Vegas I was ready, so ready. I was going to ask him to make love to me. But we got this news and I got way more upset than I expected and now we’re both awkward.”

“Your connection has faltered because of your flare-up.”

“Flare-up?”

“Sure. When people have chronic physical conditions, sometimes their symptoms act up when they’re stressed physically or emotionally. Those are flare-ups. Same principle applies here. What you’re experiencing is a distressing but temporary condition.” Castiel thinks of the “blips,” as he and Dean call them, that he’s experienced. He supposes this flare-up is an extended sort of blip. He explains this to Mia, who agrees and asks, “So what do you do when you experience these blips?”

“Well, generally I acknowledge what it is, then I take steps to counteract my thinking around it, usually by thought-stopping or by seeking out evidence or experiences that nullify it. Usually that means seeking out physical or emotional affection of some sort, from Dean or our friends or family…” Castiel stops and rolls his eyes to the ceiling, pursing his lips together. “Which is exactly what I haven’t been doing. Damn it. I forgot to try everything that’s worked for me in the past. It’s like she has the power all over again.” He sighs, then stands and stares out the window for a moment. This is another blip. You have the skills and the people to help you through this. “But she doesn’t. I do.” He nods to himself and turns to face his therapist. “Alright. Help me figure out how to get back to myself.”

When Castiel pulls into the driveway, Dean is mowing the lawn. Castiel flags him down. Dean wipes sweat and tiny grass clippings off his forehead. “Hey, sweetheart. Something wrong?”

“Yes,” he says before pulling Dean into a hot, needy kiss that leaves Dean dazed and confused. “I’m stressed out and I’m scared and I need you so much.”


“Make love to me.”

He’s not sure he’s ever seen this kaleidoscope of emotions in Dean’s eyes. Every second the emotions tumble into a new pattern — concern and desire, elation and hope, elation and fear, hope and desire. “Babe, we don’t have to.”

“I know that, but I know what I want. I wanted this when we came back from Vegas, but everything happened and I got stressed and preoccupied and I fell into old ways of dealing with things, letting her win. I don’t want to do that. I want you and I want you to make love to me. I want to try, at least. Will you?” Castiel watches his boyfriend’s eyes fall into the pattern he loves best — passion, desire, unfailing love. Dean captures his lips and grips him tightly around the waist. Castiel trusts him to take care of them both as he walks them inside and upstairs, never
straying from his mouth.

He just showered earlier this morning, but Castiel steps in the shower with Dean anyway when he reluctantly parts to rinse himself off. After just a minute the rinse is deemed good enough, the men yearning to touch as much as possible and the act of actually washing just getting in the way. They barely dry themselves, sharing one towel and moving hurriedly into their room.

Dean cradles his body as they fall to the bed. Castiel’s body sings with Dean’s touches; he is enamored, enraptured, endlessly in love. “Have you been opened up before, sweet love?” Dean asks tenderly.

Sweet love. Castiel smiles. “No, baby, not by anyone else but me.” He stops, an unwelcome thought pushing its way through. “Well, not that I know of. She… I guess they somehow maybe…”

“None of that counts. I mean with love, sweetheart.”

“Then no.”

“Okay. I’ll go slow, then.” And he does, stopping every time Castiel tenses up or squeezes his shoulder. Gradually he opens up for Dean’s fingers, the feeling at first foreign and odd but soon after becoming tolerable, then pleasant, then very pleasant. All the while Dean watches him, kisses him, adjusts and waits for him, until Castiel feels so safe, so loved, that there’s only one thing he can think to say.

“Ready, love.”

Dean asks him how he’d like to position himself, and though he’d like to be on his belly to prove something to himself, he wants to be on his back to see Dean. His lover props him up on pillows, then presses into him, taking it one shiver, one breath, one nod at a time. When he’s fully seated and their eyes meet, Castiel expects to see the gorgeous soul sunshine he adores. And he does, but it’s more than just seeing... he knows it, like their bond has transcended the limits of the human body. He smiles. “Okay, baby,” he whispers.

They’re both restrained, both cautious, and though it’s not the strongest orgasm either of them have had, it is the most memorable because it is the most important. The ecstasy is not in the physical release, but the emotional one. There will be time for wailing, hard-rocking orgasms later. This time is for cleansing tears, soft words, the joy of finding themselves in each other.

“How do you feel, sweet love?” Dean asks after he’s tenderly cleaned them both and comes back to snuggle Castiel in his arms.

“Free,” Castiel answers. “Loved.” Dean strokes his face and kisses his head. Despite the early hour, the lawn waits until the next day for Dean to finish its cut, the men choosing to focus on each other instead.

There’s no separating them after that. When Castiel is stressed, Dean dives in to make him laugh or help him relax, never making him feel bad for his worries but not letting him wallow or isolate himself, either. When Dean is stressed, Castiel does the same. They see their friends and they see Dean’s parents. They work on Castiel’s projects and they get Dean enrolled in college at the local branch of the state university. Life goes on in the Novak/Winchester household with a buoyant air until the day before they leave, when Castiel is a nervous wreck and nothing Dean does seems to help.
“Come with me,” Castiel says as he gets ready to go to see Mia — on a Thursday, the extra session at her suggestion. “Please.” Dean agrees.

It’s strange to have Dean in this space, but fitting, too. Dean knows all of his deepest secrets and Dean is his future, his future being something Castiel only had the barest theoretical grasp of when he walked into Mia’s office two years ago. Dean sits next to him, nervously tapping on his knee with one hand while holding Castiel’s in his other. Mia opens the door to greet him and doesn’t even look surprised to see Dean with him, despite never having met him and not discussing this beforehand. Mia greets them both warmly and invites them in. Dean seems to relax as she chats with him and offers them tea or water. Mia has that effect on people.

“I’m so glad you’re here together,” Mia starts after Castiel introduces Dean properly. “I wanted to discuss your future, Castiel,” she says, as if she’d known just what he was thinking of in the waiting room. Still, he’s not sure how it’s relevant when he is facing his abuser next week.

“My… future?” She nods. “Um, okay. I thought maybe you’d want to talk about court.”

“Not really.”

Castiel is baffled. “Um, okay.”

“So… what are you going to do when you’re finished your business in New York?”

“What are we going to do?”

“Oh, Dean’s going with you?” Castiel nods. “Then yes, you and Dean. Are you going to lunch, are you starting the drive right back home, are you heading to your hotel, something else?”

“Oh,” Castiel utters, baffled at her question. “You mean that day?” She nods. “Um, grab some lunch or dinner, I guess, whenever it ends. My brother Gabriel and his fiancée will be there, too, so they’ll probably join us.”

“And after that?”

“Um, go back to the hotel, I suppose, or maybe see a movie. Maybe stop to see Garth. Or nap. Probably nap,” he laughs. “Or sex. Maybe have sex. I think we’ll both need it.” He nudges his blushing boyfriend.

“Hmm. And what about the next day?”

“Well, Dean and I will probably head back home.”

“Probably. Is there a chance you’ll choose to stay?”

“Maybe not right there, but we could possibly stay nearby. We don’t have to be back right away. Charlie is happy to keep Cleo as long as we’ll let her.” Castiel grins at Dean, who’s already looking at him with that same knowing grin.

“And after that?”

“We’ll get home and I’ll get back to work and Dean will start a couple of summer intensives.” Mia nods. She sits and gazes at Castiel until he has to ask, “Mia, why are you asking me all this? I really thought you’d want to talk about court.” He knows there’s a method to her questions, but he cannot figure it out.
“Let me share my observations,” she smiles. “You came in here today with your partner, something you told me you’d never have again. You didn’t ask my permission ahead of time because you trusted yourself to know what you needed and you put your needs first, even though I may have been angry with you. You trust him enough to go on a long car ride with him, to know about your abuse, and to meet me. You were able to acknowledge a future, even if it was just lunch, though it was a lot more. You are going to be joined by your brother and his fiancée, a relationship you rekindled even though you were afraid of harm coming to him and of his potential feelings about your actions. You had a variety of options you were considering, and you weren’t rigid about whether those options could occur in public, even in the same area where your trauma occurred. You listed a variety of fun self-care options. You smiled when you mentioned sex and acknowledged both your needs and Dean’s needs. You talked about your pet, something else you never thought you’d have again. You talked about returning to the home you share with Dean, the one both your talent and your love for each other made into something beautiful. You talked about going back to work, something you’ve always loved and can do freely now, and you mentioned Dean’s classes, which involve you supporting him through his challenges just as he’s supported you through yours. See what I’m getting at, Castiel?”

Seemingly mystified, Dean asks, “How the hell did you get all of that out of talking about our plans for the day?” Castiel laughs and squeezes his hand.

“She’s really good and she’s known me a long time,” he says to Dean. Then, to Mia, he says, “You want me to remember that I’ve made a lot of progress. I’m doing so much better than I was that this court date is just a blip and not my whole life. Right?” She smiles and nods. “And we already talked about my feelings and strategies for coping at our last session. They’re important, but I know what to do. You want me to focus on my future.”

“You got it,” she says. Dean looks impressed. Castiel’s not surprised at all. “Sometimes the best thing you can do when you’re stressed is focus on the things that bring you joy and a sense of control.”

“You’re right,” Castiel smiles. “As usual.”

“It’s not about me being right, it’s about what’s right for you. You got this, Castiel. Be brave, not unafraid. This event will happen, and it will end, and no matter what she does, you get to continue your new life. So I have a homework assignment for you both: enjoy each other. Give yourselves time to relax, give yourselves permission to laugh and have fun even if you’re stressed.”

“Can sex be part of this homework?” Castiel asks purposely, just to see Dean’s freckles jump out against his flushed cheeks.

“Most definitely,” Mia laughs. Castiel joins in, hugging Dean as he hides his blush and a smile, and marvels at just how far he’s come. He’s afraid, but brave, because his future is in his grasp and it’s sunshine-bright.

Chapter End Notes

Growth is a beautiful thing. <3

Next chapter: Prelude to court. Ready for another surprise?

Referenced in this chapter:
SpongeBob SquarePants, “A SquarePants Family Vacation” and “Bumper to Bumper”

“Waking Up in Vegas,” Katy Perry
The ranch-style house on three acres of land is exactly what Dean imagined when he thought of the place where Cas grew up: simple, small but with plenty of outdoor and work space, and charming. Coventry, Rhode Island is an old town about half an hour southwest of the capital of Providence, with lots of old farmhouses and churches that reflect its age. It definitely seems fitting for people who work with wood, like Cas and his dad — lots of inspiration.

“Hi, Cassie!” Beth calls from the small farmer’s porch. “Hi, Dean!”

Ah, she remembered. Or she was reminded. Whatever. “Hi, beautiful,” Dean says, kissing her cheek. She glows.

“Flirting with my wife, are you?” Ollie asks as he lets them all inside.

“Couldn’t help it, sir,” he grins.

Ollie laughs and claps him on the shoulder. “Make yourself at home.”

Gabe and Kali are here already, visiting for the night. It’s nice being in Cas’ before — in a place that was his before everything happened, with people who’ve known him all his life. Ollie’s handiwork is seen all over the place in the furniture and the door frames. Photos and awards of Cas and Gabe’s accomplishments fill the shelves and wall space, some in frames and others simply tacked to the wall. There’s a crucifix in the living room and prayer beads (they have a name but Dean can’t remember it) on a table, and a statue of the Virgin Mary in the backyard. Dean hadn’t realized the depth of their devotion to their Catholic faith, which makes their acceptance of his and Cas’ relationship that much more significant. The large furniture pieces match but the small ones don’t. There’s a handmade afghan draped over the couch. It’s cozy and lived-in and completely reflective of the Novaks and it’s perfect. It’s easy to make himself at home.

Dinner is spaghetti and meatballs with garlic bread. Because the vegan thing confuses his father sometimes, Kali made sure that the meatballs were kept separate for Cas and that the garlic bread was made with olive oil instead of butter, which Cas acknowledges with a gentle smile and a squeeze of her arm that makes Dean’s heart flutter. He loves watching Cas allow himself to be cared for. After they eat, Ollie turns on the old VCR that they still have on a shelf in their entertainment center and pops in a videotape from a nearby stack.

“Oh dear Lord,” Cas mutters. The tape is filled with home movie footage of Cas and Gabe as kids. Even Gabe looks a little embarrassed. The first movie includes a couple of Christmases, a Nativity play (Gabriel was Gabriel, of course, while Cas played a shepherd), and an Easter play (where Cas got the lead as Jesus and Gabe is still, even now, a little bitter about it). The second tape is various stuff around the house, mostly the brothers filming each other. Dean and Kali laugh their asses off at Cas and Gabe acting in commercials for fake products, at their remake of Star Wars (Gabe was Han Solo, Cas was Luke Skywalker), and at their “Stand Up Comedy Night and Talent Show
“Extravaganza!!!!!!” that featured Gabe as the comedian, Cas as a singer/dancer, and a lot of arguing about camera angles.

“I wanna see Cas’ cheering videos,” Dean grins at his boyfriend. Cas moans.

“Oh, we have one from the year the boys cheered together,” Ollie says, turning to find it. Gabriel gripes about being dragged into this mess and Ollie says dismissively, “You didn’t have to cheer. You already met your requirement by then, but you did it so your brother wouldn’t feel alone his freshman year. And you loved it, so stop.” Gabe shrugs.

The video is shaky and a bit far away, but Dean immediately finds Cas’ dark hair and lean frame. He was strong even then, holding up a female cheerleader without breaking a sweat. “Wait, wait, wait!” Gabe calls and grabs the remote, pausing the tape. “Cassie, do you still remember the cheer?”

“Unfortunately,” he grumbles, but stands when Gabe tugs at his sleeve. They look at each other and smile before reciting it loudly and enthusiastically, with jumps and everything. Everyone falls over each other laughing when they’re done.

“But do you remember this?” Gabe asks afterward. He does some sort of locomotive dance movement that Cas laughs at hysterically and copies.

“And what about eyeball soup?” Cas asks.

“Eyeball casserole,” Gabe responds.

“Eyeball cookies!” Beth pipes up. Peals of laughter rise from the mother and sons.

“Old family joke,” Ollie explains with a chuckle. “I have no idea how it started or why it’s funny.”

Dean and Kali smile at each other. Sometimes it doesn’t matter if you’re in on the joke. What matters most is the people you love are happy. It’s something he knows neither he nor Kali take for granted for the men they love. Ollie seems to feel the same way, watching his family fondly.

When the laughter has died down, Gabe and Kali watch TV with Beth while Ollie takes Dean and Cas to his workshop to show them his latest project. Dean quietly watches Ollie explain something to Cas and Cas offer a suggestion. They point and glide their hands along the wood and Dean notices that even though Cas looks much more like Beth than Ollie (while Gabe is a near clone of their father), they have the same hands. Cas is absorbed in the task, though he keeps peering at the clock. At 9:00, he excuses himself and heads to the house. Dean isn’t sure whether to follow, but his question is answered when Ollie calls him over.

“They’ll be done in a little while,” Ollie says. “Do you want to help me with this piece?”

“Sure,” Dean says.

Ollie shows him how to place the spindles on the crib he is making for a customer. The crib makes him think of Cas cuddling babies. It puts a little smile on his face. They work quietly for a few minutes until Ollie speaks. “I never thought he’d settle down with anyone.”

Dean looks up. “Really?”

“Mmm. He was always a little different. He told me he was going to live in an old farmhouse by himself with ten dogs, and I believed him.” Dean laughs. That sounds like Cas. “Then he moved to New York. I think he had his fun while he was there, like young people do sometimes, but
eventually he got himself a good job and stopped going to the bars and I figured a nice woman would follow after that. I was worried about him marrying that April woman. It didn’t feel right to me. But he said she was pregnant and he wanted to do the right thing. He’s always been a good boy.” Ollie stops and shakes his head. “When he disappeared, I lost it. And because of Beth, I couldn’t really grieve openly. I didn’t even know what I was grieving. I just knew he was gone. And then for him to show up a year and a half later and find out what really happened? Dean, it’s a hell of a thing to find out that your son was afraid for his life every day and you didn’t even know it. Makes you question everything.”

Dean can only imagine the pain Ollie and their family went through. He remembers the pain of knowing Sam had been abused, which was bad enough without adding a disappearance on top of it. He thinks of those videotapes, the ones that didn’t look dusty, and wonders if Ollie sat on the couch at night, all alone, watching them and grieving for his son.

“My faith is still pretty shaken, even though we have him back. Me and God are kind of on the outs. But Cassie, he still has faith. He’s up there at the house right now, praying with his mother. He has so many reasons to have lost faith, but he didn’t.” Ollie wipes his hands, then his eyes. “We brought him up Catholic, but Cassie’s faith isn’t about religion, never has been. He believes in the goodness of everything and everyone around him. I can’t imagine that didn’t get shaken up, but he’s here and he’s an even better man than I remember. I wish I was half the man he is. And I’m guessing you’re a big part of that.” He looks intensely at Dean. “He loves you a hell of a lot, and he has faith in you. And I’ll admit I’m still getting used to him settling down with a nice man instead of a nice woman, but that’s just a matter of time, not a matter of right or wrong. He loves you and you love him. You’re good for each other, I think.” Ollie sighs. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this except to say that, with all Cassie’s been through, you must be a helluva guy for him to choose you over ten dogs.”

Dean doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry at just how deep Ollie’s statement really is, so he does a little of both. Ollie pats him on the back and leads him up to the house.

Gabe and Kali are drinking beer in the kitchen, and Ollie joins them after pointing out where Cas is. Dean peeks into the dark room, where a single electric candle is lit. His mother is on her knees on some sort of kneeler that looks handmade (it probably is), while Cas sits in a chair, his elbows on his knees and the prayer beads in his hands. They’re reciting prayers together, one prayer per bead. The dim light plays over Cas’ face, making him look younger and peaceful — or maybe that is the effect of his worship. Dean thinks of Ollie’s words about faith. Even when Cas was experiencing the worst of his abuse, there had to be some spark of faith there somewhere, in God or himself or the good of humanity or something. He doesn’t know how Cas would’ve survived it, or escaped it, or chosen to heal from it otherwise. He wonders why Cas doesn’t pray at home. They finish and Cas opens his eyes, startled to see Dean.

“Sorry,” Dean says.

“No, it’s fine,” Cas assures him. He helps his mother into her bedroom across the hall. Dean stays in the prayer room or whatever this room is. He takes the beads in hand and rubs them between his thumb and index finger as he glances around the room. There’s another crucifix and another statue, but other than that the room looks like any other room in any other house, stuffed with bookcases and random things they couldn’t find a place for elsewhere. His eye catches a laminated picture of a beach with a set of footprints and some words on it. He reads the little story, called “Footprints.”

“I thought about that story on some of the worst nights,” Cas says as he wraps his arms around Dean from behind. Dean startles and fumbles with the beads, trying to give them back, but Cas simply closes his hands around his and they hold the beads together. “I imagined myself a lot like
the man, pissed off and hurt because I felt like I was going through the hardest parts of my life alone, and then I imagined that God was carrying me. It helped.” He kisses the hollow under Dean’s ear. “My mom’s pretty religious. We used to say the rosary all the time when we were kids, until Gabe and I didn’t want to anymore. They didn’t make us. After my mom’s brain injury, though, I’d say it with her when I came home to visit. It made her happy. That was all before April, of course.”

“Do you pray at home? I never see you do it,” he asks, grasping the rosary (he knew there was a name for the beads).

“I don’t say the rosary or anything, but I do usually say a few words to myself before I go to sleep. I didn’t for a while, but I’ve started again.”

“Oh. Okay. Um, you can, if you want, like I mean, you can pray. We can put up pictures and stuff, make you a room like this—”

“You want to make me a junk room? That’s what this is.”

“No!” Dean cries, flustered at the teasing in his boyfriend’s voice. He’s trying to be sincere, damn it. “I mean if you need a space or something. You know what I mean. Don’t be an asshole. Aw, shit,” Realizing he swore—twice—while holding the beads, his body heats furiously and he drops them into Cas’ hands. Cas laughs.

“You know, God can hear you all the time.” Cas smirks and nuzzles him behind his ear. “All the time.” He rocks him, nibbling his ear, and whispers, “Every time you say His name.”

“Dude,” Dean whines when he catches on. Cas cackles.

“Dean, if He didn’t want it to feel good, He wouldn’t have given us the parts to make it so. Come on.” He puts the rosary down reverently, then drags Dean to the spare bedroom and presses soft, loose kisses to his neck.

“I’m not having sex with you in your parents’ house,” Dean whispers, arms folded and trying to remain unaffected. “I have some restraint.”

“That’s too bad, because I don’t. But I respect your decision, baby,” Cas says. He kisses him lightly, then slinks to the bed and undresses. He takes himself in hand and stares at him with wide blue eyes as he jacks himself slowly, his other hand grazing his pebbled nipples and his smooth, shaved skin.

“Fuck,” he mutters to himself. He glances at the closed door that has no lock on it. He listens to Ollie, Gabe, and Kali laughing about something in the kitchen. He hears the muted noise of the TV in Beth and Ollie’s bedroom. He glances at the photo of Jesus tacked above the bed. He looks at Cas again, so damn gorgeous as he pleasures his body with confidence.

“If I go to Hell it’s all your fault,” Dean growls as he strips and drops down next to his boyfriend.

***

It’s a beautiful June morning, warm with a little breeze, and they’re heading to Pachaug State Forest, because Dean promised his mother back at Thanksgiving that he would take her for a ride on his bike. He didn’t forget it or blow her off, even though she had forgotten. When he mentioned it, she was as delighted as when he suggested it the first time.

“Thank you for this, Dean,” Castiel says quietly even though they’re the only two in the SUV. He
takes Dean’s hand. “This means the world to my family and me.”

Dean shrugs it off, as Castiel knew he would. “You guys are awesome,” he says simply.

“We think you’re awesome, too,” Castiel smiles, tickling his boyfriend’s knuckles. “I never thanked you for last night.”

Dean wiggles his brows. “I should be thanking you. You have awesome ideas.”

“I don’t mean that, although thank you for that, too,” Castiel grins. “I mean for your understanding about my faith. It was very sweet of you to ask about my prayers and to offer to make me a room.”

Dean shrugs again. “Anything for you.” Castiel squeezes his hand and keeps driving.

Riding with two people on a MX bike isn’t something one is supposed to do, according to Dean, but he keeps it slow as he takes Mom along an easy trail. She’s having the time of her life. Castiel hears her infectious laugh even from quite a distance away. Castiel and the rest of his family walk the trail, his dad and Gabe keeping up a lively conversation while he and Kali saunter quietly. He grins toothily when Dean and his mom pass them; Dean removes one of his hands just long enough to blow him a kiss before taking off again. He says a little prayer as he hears his mom and Dean whoop and holler: Thank you for Dean.

After spending most of the day outdoors, they head to Gabe and Kali’s to clean up, then have dinner at Flora’s. It brings back the memory of his first date with Dean. So many emotions are packed into that one memory; he suddenly wants to curl up in Dean’s arms and hide away from everyone for a while. He clings to Dean’s knee the rest of the meal. Dean peers at him quizzically and Castiel smiles tiredly and closes his eyes, then leans into his side. He feels tender lips on his hair and an arm around his neck. That arm would’ve freaked him out once. Now, it’s comforting. Dean murmurs something about going to bed when they get back to his brother’s house and they do just that, though it’s barely past 8:00. Castiel does just what he wanted to do the whole evening and falls asleep curled in Dean’s arms.

On Sunday they say goodbye to Gabe, Kali, and his parents. His parents won’t be going to court since Castiel didn’t want to expose his mother to April and whatever vitriol she might spew, so he gives them long, tender hugs goodbye. Gabe and Kali will meet them at the courthouse tomorrow, since it’s only an hour and a half drive. Castiel gives them quick hugs and tells them to have a safe trip, then he is alone with Dean.

“I love your family, Cas, but I’m glad it’s just us for the day,” Dean says as they take off in Kali’s car (not wanting to bring Castiel’s, both because of the trailer with the dirt bike attached to it and because he doesn’t want to risk her seeing his license plate and somehow determining his location from it).

“I am, too,” he admits.

The ride feels much too short, and anxiety makes him vibrate in his seat when they cross into Albany. Dean takes his hand and doesn’t let go until they get to the restaurant for lunch. Castiel doesn’t want to eat but forces himself, if only to keep Dean from noticing how anxious he is. It doesn’t work.

“Sweetheart, the quin-oh-ah doesn’t just jump into your mouth if you stare at it long enough,” Dean says, nudging him and smiling softly. Castiel grins at Dean’s purposeful mispronunciation of quinoa and his attempt to lift his spirits. “You know what I think would help you more than food right now?”
“What?”

“A visit to a furry friend.”

Castiel stares at his boyfriend. “Apollo?”

“Why not? You mentioned it when we talked to Mia and he knows you’re here because he’s testifying for you. We could just do it before instead of after the court shit.”

“I…” Castiel stops and thinks. What would be best for Apollo? The dog probably won’t remember you either way. So what’s best for you, Castiel? “Yes, that might help.”

Dean’s practically glowing at Castiel’s answer (probably relieved he didn’t have to argue with me, Castiel thinks wryly). They finish eating, Castiel actually lifting his fork to his mouth this time.

Mr. Fizzles’ Dog Grooming and Boarding is one of the happiest places on Earth, in Castiel’s opinion. One reason is the dogs… so many dogs. Castiel wants to love on every one of them, even the scared ones. Especially the scared ones, probably. The other reason is Garth, the owner, who’s like a puppy himself, always friendly and enthusiastic.

“Mi amigo!” Garth yells as he sprints out the door and straight into Castiel’s arms. “I’m so glad you called!”

“I hope I didn’t inconvenience you.” More than I already have.

“Naw, not at all! Had to swing by anyway. You look great, man!” he gushes as he stands at arm’s length and looks him over. “Wow, you’re a much happier guy now, huh?”

“Much,” Castiel agrees. “Garth, this is my boyfriend, Dean. Dean, this is Garth.”

Dean goes for the handshake, but gets the hug. Castiel snickers, then smiles fondly at Dean’s easy acceptance of the bundle of energy in his arms. He marvels at all the positive people in his life, people who make his world and the world at large a better place. Mia was right. April really is the exception and not the rule.

“Well, come on in! You can see Apollo and my little one, too! Bess is here with our son, Aiden.”

“Congratulations,” Castiel says.

“Thanks. Come on!” Garth beckons them to follow him with a wide sweep of his arm. They walk through the reception area and into a small office, where a woman Castiel presumes is Bess is holding a bright-eyed little boy who is sitting up in her lap. Across from them, standing on the desk with his tail wagging and his tongue washing the baby’s face, is Apollo. Castiel’s fist flies to his mouth as tears form in his eyes. He’s blinking them away, not wanting to make a scene, when Garth says, “Look, Apollo! It’s Daddy!” and Castiel loses any semblance of control he thought he had over his waterworks.

The little white dog turns in his direction and wags his tail furiously. He doesn’t know whether Apollo truly remembers him or whether he just likes people, but he barks and runs in place and stands on his back feet, encouraging Castiel to come to him, which he does quickly. “Oh, Apollo, baby, I missed you,” he coos to the little ball of fur. “How are you, baby? How are you? Look at you!” He kisses and strokes the dog’s white coat as Apollo licks anywhere he can reach. He holds him until Apollo squirms to be let down. Castiel scooches to the floor and places him down gently. When he’s on the floor, he bows down toward Castiel, gesturing that he wants to play. He scratches his ears. “Okay, little boy, okay,” he laughs. Garth gives him a few toys and Cas takes
him to a small, fenced-off yard to play. After a couple of minutes, though, the Bichon Frise looks longingly at the other side of the fence, where Garth’s boarder dogs are. He lets him through, then follows when Apollo looks back. Apollo runs around the perimeter, yipping happily with his friends and encouraging Castiel to play with all of them like he used to do when he’d bring Apollo for grooming (though it was tougher when his leg was broken). Being here playing with Apollo and the dogs feels like a slice of Heaven… except this time, he’s not going back to Hell when he leaves.

“Gonna get you guys!” his boyfriend’s familiar voice shouts as he races up from behind and starts chasing the excited dogs. Castiel smiles at his joy and playfulness, then joins him. Garth follows soon after, Aiden on his hip. Castiel stops to admire the infant and soon finds the baby pressed into his arms.

“Hello, Aiden,” he says to the gurgling boy. “Thank you for letting me hold you. You have wonderful parents, you know that? Kind, selfless parents who love you and Apollo so much. You are a very lucky little boy. Yes, you are.” He blows raspberries in the air with wide eyes and makes the baby laugh. “I think Apollo loves you very much, and you love him, don’t you? Yes, you do.” Dean walks up to him, handing him the fluffy dog, and Castiel holds them both in his arms for a moment, enjoying the feeling of connection. He kisses both the dog and the baby, then places Apollo down and sits at the picnic table with Garth, Bess, and Dean. They talk a little bit about court and a little bit about the past, but mostly they talk about the future. It’s good. It’s very good.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, man,” Garth says brightly. “And hey, don’t worry about it. You got a lot of people on your side.”

Garth doesn’t know just how true that is. Castiel didn’t, either, until the last year. “I’m very lucky,” he says, taking Dean’s hand.

“Yeah,” he says. Garth’s typical smile drops a little. “So, you’ll probably want to bring Apollo back with you, huh?”

He can’t say he hadn’t thought about it on his way here, or many times since he brought him here for his own protection. But seeing how happy he is—how happy they all are—it’s not even a question. “No,” Castiel says. “He has a great home here. He has you and Bess and Aiden and all the dogs. He’s happy here. All I ever wanted for him was to be safe and happy.”

Garth brightens immediately as he barks a laugh. “That’s great, man! We just love him so much, and Aiden”—he looks over at his son—“he’d be heartbroken. I’m sorry, though. I feel bad.”

“It’s alright, Garth,” he says with a reassuring turn of his lips. “I’m okay. He’s happy, I’m happy, you’re happy. And Apollo has a sister of sorts at our house.” He shows Garth pictures of Cleo. “If you ever want to visit, please let me know.”

“Will do, man!” Garth beams.

They say their goodbyes, then drive back to the hotel, picking up sandwiches at Berben and Wolff’s along the way. He’s missed their Wing Burger tremendously. Dean digs into the Seitan Philly with his usual gusto and moans at the flavor. Castiel chuckles. They watch TV for a while and even though he has to see April tomorrow, Castiel thinks he’s going to be okay. He falls asleep with Dean’s arms around him.

At four o’clock in the morning, he’s not okay. His skin is crawling and fire is burning in his veins. It’s all so much. He gets up and paces. Today he’s seeing her again. Today he has to listen to people tell his story, though none of them know it like he does. Today he has to tell his story. *Fuck.*
Why are you subjecting yourself to this? He breathes. Because you want to be free. Right. But right now he feels like he’s trapped in his own body. His brain is so overloaded that it’s shipped off its extra work to his muscles and gut, which are complaining loudly about it. He needs to get this worked out. Now.

He peeks at Dean and shakes his head, not willing to wake him. He thinks about a run but decides against it, old fears too ramped up in his mind for him to get any relief from it. He does jumping jacks instead, but it’s not enough. He looks up “how to do a plank” on Google and does several, but they don’t seem to do much, either. He’s reconsidering his run when Dean wakes up. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“Amped up. Need to get out of my head. Do you want to go for a run?”

“At”—he checks his phone—“4:15am? Nope.” He stands and ambles sleepily to Castiel on bow legs. “But if you need to get out of your head, maybe I could help you some other way?”

Looking at Dean in the glow of the bathroom nightlight shining through the crack of the open door, Castiel knows what he needs. “You can,” he growls before muckling onto his mouth.

“I meant talking,” Dean laughs when Castiel lets him breathe.

“Like hell you did,” Castiel retorts.

They make out frantically until neither of them can stand, then they move to the bed. Castiel lies down and lets Dean work him over, most of his body responding eagerly to the touch. Most of it except… “Fuck! Fuck it all to hell, goddamnit!” he yells, rolling over and slamming the mattress with his fists as his half-erection sags. He pulls at his hair in frustration. “I just… want… to be normal!” he yells, rolling over and slamming the mattress with his fists as his half-erection sags. He pulls at his hair in frustration. “I just… want… to be normal!” he screams into a pillow. He sobs for quite some time, the tension bleeding out of his exhausted muscles. Eventually he feels something cool and wet on his back, then Dean’s hands massaging him with lotion, probably the travel size bottle the hotel provided. He slows his breathing and relaxes into the touch, heavier than usual as Dean works his rock-hard, knotted muscles. Unraveling the knots hurts, but it hurts so good, as the old song goes. It’s sort of like his life over the past couple of years, he muses — unraveling the knots in his life hurt (a lot), but now his life feels very, very good.

“Sorry,” Castiel rasps as he sits up. “Got overwhelmed.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Dean says, taking his hand. “You’re stressed. Anyone would be.”

“I woke up and my body was just so wound up.”

“I know, babe. I could feel it.”

“I’m sorry I’m broken.” He looks at his limp penis and pouts.

Dean lifts his chin with his finger. “Hey, don’t go there. You are not broken, babe, you know that. You’re stressed, that’s all. Sometimes things don’t work the way we want ’em to when we’re stressed. So tomorrow night, or the night after, or whenever you want to, we’ll go for it then. And hell, Cas, we’ll probably both need it by then.” Dean tugs him into a kiss, which feels exactly like what Castiel needs right now. They snuggle down into the sheets, kissing gently, until the alarm goes off and they have to get up for the day. The day.

Chapter End Notes
Next time: Court day.

Referenced in this chapter:
“Footprints,” author unknown (but apparently hotly debated, from my research!)
“Hurts So Good” by John Mellencamp is the song Cas references when he’s talking about unraveling the knots in his body/life.

The eyeball joke is from my own family. I have no idea how it started, but it’s a very, very silly thing that always made my mother and I laugh.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Court day.

All of you who have commented in this story have been so supportive of Cas’ journey, and I want to tell you all how beautiful I think that is. <3

*Just about everything mentioned in this chapter has already been discussed previously, and any of April’s actions should be expected. However, please feel free to check out the warnings in the end notes. Keep yourself safe and well. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’d been hoping to avoid a court appearance, but no such luck. If you hadn’t been so trusting and just insisted on a pregnancy test, you wouldn’t be here right now. He sighs. What’s done is done, Castiel. You can’t change it. Dean squeezes his hand as he stares at the courthouse, focusing on keeping his breathing even. And you have Dean, so something good came out of it. He squeezes back weakly and they head inside, where he’s expecting to meet Gabe and Kali as well as Pam, Garth, Chuck, and Mia, who are all testifying on his behalf.

He meets them all—and Sam and Jess, and Benny and Andrea, and Donna, and John and Mary. Only Charlie is missing, and likely only because she stayed behind for Cleo and her mom. “What are you all doing here?” Castiel asks incredulously.

“Heads up, Castiel. You’re trying to be the hero for once.”

“Supporting you,” Sam says with a gentle smile. Castiel shakes his head, overwhelmed.

“I—I truly don’t know what to say besides thank you, and I know that’s not enough,” he stammers. “You took time off from work and drove all this way just for me, I just… I don’t understand why.”

“We love you,” Jess declares simply.

Is it that simple? It used to be. It still is, Castiel. It still is. “I love all of you,” he says—not as simply as Jess, because opening his heart again has been an arduous process. “Really. Thank you.”

“Castiel,” Michael greets him. “How are you doing this morning?”

“He’s doing well. Better with my family and friends here.”

“Very important to have that support,” he smiles. “A word?” Castiel nods. The attorney leads him into a small conference room. When they’re settled, he says, “I just want to review everything one more time.”

They go over Castiel’s story. Michael warns him again about the questions he may be asked and coaches him to answer questions calmly and succinctly, without showing weakness or giving any unnecessary details that the defense can exploit. Castiel thinks he’ll do pretty well. Little does April know how well she prepared him to face her in court. He reviews the things he’ll be bringing up when April is on the stand. Most of it they’d discussed, but the things about her past that Michael was able to dig up—her chaotic, abusive early childhood, her extensive history of hospital and group home stays and failed foster placements, her poor employment history, her petty crime
convictions, the lawsuit against an ex that won her the house she owns, and her history of restraining orders—is new to him. He wishes he’d known all of it a lot sooner (such as before he married her).

They make their way into the courtroom. The divorce proceedings are public, which is exceedingly stressful, but his loved ones are in the audience and that helps. A couple of people with press tags are in the audience as well. Michael warned him there might be. Since his disappearance had made the local news, his reappearance was bound to, as well. Castiel sighs in resignation as he stands by his lawyer. Dean, directly behind him, leans forward and gives his hand a squeeze. Castiel turns to share a good luck kiss with his boyfriend (he got one in the hall but one can never have too many) when his breath catches in his throat. April is walking down the short aisle toward the defense table. Dean must notice his reaction, because his grip tightens instead of loosens. She stops directly in front of them.

“Castiel, why are you doing this?” she asks with an air of innocence. “This is a marriage, and marriage is forever. You know that.”

*Over two years later and she’s still trying to manipulate me,* Castiel thinks. “Not this one. It was a marriage in the eyes of the State of New York, not in the eyes of God,” Castiel responds, his voice quiet but blessedly steady. “And not in my eyes. Marriage should be entered with pure intentions. Yours were anything but.”

“Sanctimonious bastard,” she growls. “You are my husband. Mine.”

Dean is grinding his teeth so hard that Castiel can hear it. He grips his hand tighter. Michael lays a hand on his shoulder, probably not wanting him to say anything further. So he doesn’t. Instead, he looks her square in the eyes, then turns and kisses Dean full on the mouth. She’s still staring when they part, but he doesn’t bother looking back, instead taking his place again next to Michael and looking straight ahead. April stands in the aisle until the judge approaches the bench. *Here we go.*

“Alright, we’re here to consider the divorce petition between the plaintiff, Mr. Castiel Novak, and the defendant, Ms. April Novak,” the judge says as he shuffles through the papers before him. His face twists into a scowl and he looks up. “Ms. Novak, Mr. Novak has not requested any division of marital assets and no financial support, and he has been away for over two years now, according to both of your statements. Why, exactly, are we here?”

April’s attorney stands. “Your Honor, my client does not want this divorce. She wants to remain married to her husband. She believes in the sanctity of marriage, and is willing to forgive her husband for his”—the smug defense attorney glances at Dean—“transgressions. She believes they hit a stumbling block in their marriage, as most married couples do, and she wants the opportunity to work that out.”

The judge frowns. “I see,” he says, then sighs. “And Mr. Novak, why not just go for irretrievable breakdown?”

Michael stands and says, “My client rightly assumed that his estranged wife would not be cooperative. Furthermore, this is for the benefit of my client. He was treated cruelly in his marriage, and as part of moving on with his life he wants to acknowledge this and hold her accountable.”

“Very well. Let’s get started.”

The witness testimony goes better than Castiel expects. His witnesses are firmly on his side. Garth is sweet and surprisingly unshakable as he testifies to Castiel’s general mood, the bruises he saw,
and his desperate visit with Apollo. Chuck, who’s had some experience testifying, is steely and
doesn’t let the defense attorney trick him (even when he tries to get him to say where Castiel is
living now). Pam’s testimony is quick but irrefutable in terms of the old tattoo, especially since she
snapped pictures of it. When she describes the tattoo aloud, Castiel hears gasps from the people
behind him. He hopes that can only go in his favor. Michael also asks her about her work with
survivors of abuse, and though the defense attempts to dismiss her testimony as “irrelevant,” she
gets enough in to get the point across, Castiel thinks. There are medical reports and photos from
when April broke his leg, and the physician who treated him noted in the report that some of his
bruises were “not consistent with an injury of this nature, particularly around the chest, neck, and
arms,” but rather “appeared to be made with fists or blunt objects.” The defense, of course, treats
that dismissively, too, especially since the report says Castiel denied being abused (which he did,
of course). Mia is last, just before Castiel, and she is a rock star—unintimidated, factual, and
confident. She testifies that Castiel met the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder when he first
came to her, but that after two years of treatment, he no longer meets the criteria. She puts the
defense attorney in his place when he tries to call Castiel crazy, and she uses little tricks to make
sure she gets to say just what she wants to say, even when the defense is trying to get her not to say
it. Castiel glances at Michael, who looks impressed.

They break for lunch and, despite the support of everyone and their observations that things seem
to be going in his favor, Castiel can barely eat. He knows he’s next to testify, knows he’s about to
spill his story for the world to hear. Dean, who he expected to be giving him a pep talk, is

“Yeah,” he says, moving his fries around on his plate but not actually eating them.

“Liar,” Castiel says with affection. He kisses him on the cheek, then moves his mouth to his ear.
“What are you thinking of, dear heart?”

Dean turns into Castiel’s space. “I just keep looking at her and imagining what she did and now
you have to relive that and… and I just hate her so much,” he murmurs. “I just hate her. I wanna
just go up to her and…” He doesn’t finish his thought, but he doesn’t have to, really. His clenched
teeth and fists say it for him.

“Love,” Castiel says, taking his hand and uncurling his fingers. “The best revenge is a happy life.
So let’s make it the happiest fucking life we can, okay? I think we have a damn good start.”

Dean smiles, the light returning to his eyes once again. “You’re right, sweetheart.” He chuckles
and adds, “Nice move kissing me in front of her, by the way. Thought she was gonna choke on her
own rage.”

Castiel shrugs. “I was going to kiss you, anyway. She interrupted me. She brought it onto herself.”
He smiles wickedly, laughing when Dean cackles so loudly that their friends, family, and everyone
in the restaurant take notice. He soaks in Dean’s sunshine, his heart a solar panel harnessing
Dean’s energy to keep him going.

When they resume, Castiel is called to the stand. His palms are sweaty and his heart is beating
faster than usual, but after he takes his oath and sits, Michael gives him a few seconds to collect
himself. In those few seconds he looks at Dean, Sam and Jess, John and Mary, Gabe and Kali,
Benny and Andrea, Donna, Chuck, Garth, Pam, and Mia. He doesn’t bother looking at the rest of
the crowd, because who knows (or cares) what their opinions of him are. Finally, his eyes rest on
April, his soon-to-be-ex wife, who has no one behind her. He turns to Michael, who says, “Tell the
court your story, Castiel.”

Castiel breathes deeply and tells it from the beginning—the breakup, his vulnerable state, meeting
April, trying to break up with her, the pregnancy he never asked to be confirmed with physical evidence, the marriage he felt responsible to enter. The abuse, in gory detail. His escape. Re-establishing his life after living in fear for so long. Michael, other than asking for clarification here or there, lets him tell it without interruption. When he finishes, Michael thanks him softly. He looks around at everyone then—first at the people he loves and cares for, most of whom are crying quietly, then at the rest of the crowd, most of whom are doing the same. He glances at April, who is seething, and at her lawyer, who stands, looking like he’s sizing him up for the kill. Castiel isn’t afraid. He’s already seen that look on the face of Mr. Defense Attorney’s client, and he survived every attempt she made. *Try it,* he thinks. *I am a fighter. I am stronger than you. And I have overcome.*

“Mr. Novak, you testified that you married my client because she was pregnant. This is a marriage you entered voluntarily, correct?”

“More or less.”

“Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

“And once you moved in, knowing she had a house of her own and a sizable amount of money, isn’t it true that you quit your job?”

“Part of that is true.”

“Please answer the question.”

“Because she wanted me to stay home with her when she claimed to be ill from her alleged pregnancy, I quit a job I loved.”

The attorney is getting pissed already, Castiel can tell. But Castiel is simply telling the truth, he thinks with a smirk he manages to keep to himself. The man asks him several more questions about why he quit his job, accuses him of not being competent enough to keep up his business on his own (which is why his wife had to be so involved), and tries to tear him down for not getting his wife medical attention after her “miscarriages.” He calls Castiel’s claims of physical abuse “preposterous” given April’s size and meek manner (she has him fooled, just like she fooled Castiel once), says that the emotional abuse happened in reverse, and that the sexual abuse “didn’t happen, period.”

“Mr. Novak, isn’t it true that you are calling normal marital relations ‘sexual abuse’ because you weren’t satisfied with just having one woman to have sex with? Or having a woman at all? Isn’t it true you wanted a man?”

Michael moves to object, but Castiel anticipates it and wants to get the upper hand on this guy. “Which question am I supposed to answer?” The attorney, predictably, scowls.

“Why did you call normal marital relations sexual abuse?”

“I called it sexual abuse because she forced me to have sex with her when I didn’t want to.”

“There was no force, Mr. Novak. All she tried to do was to make you happy. In fact, isn’t it true that my client, in a desperate attempt to keep you happy and satisfied in the marriage, allowed you to indulge in your homosexual fantasies?”

Castiel pauses, swallowing, then says, “Being raped while in the presence of her and another man
The attorney, seemingly angry that he’s being outsmarted, growls, “Raped. How would you know, Mr. Novak? You testified that you don’t remember most of the night you claim you were raped because you were intoxicated! Or do you not remember because there were so many men that you lost track? Are you claiming rape because you exploited her offer and had multiple partners and then regretted—”

“Objection! Badgering the witness!”

“Mr. Novak,” the attorney yells over the din, “isn’t it true that all of the things you’re accusing my client of are things that you made up in your own mind?”

The courtroom is loud as the attorney throws lies and wild theories at him, none of which Castiel dignifies with a response. He knows how to keep his mouth shut when it’s in his best interest and how to tune out blatant false accusations. The judge bangs the gavel and calls for order. Castiel thought that only happened in the movies. He glances at Dean, who looks murderous and is being held down by his brother’s hands on his shoulders. He makes eye contact with his boyfriend, and his eyes must say enough because Dean settles into his seat. The judge dresses down the defense attorney for his ‘theatrics’ and warns him to tone it down— “This is the Albany County Supreme Court, not Law and Order. You will behave or you will be out.”

The rest of the cross-examination is swift, and soon Castiel is released to his seat. The court takes a break. When Castiel turns around, he finds himself with his arms full of Winchester—Mary Winchester, to be precise. “I am so, so sorry, Cas,” she sobs. He assumes she is referring to her actions against him when they met. He rubs her back and assures her that all is forgiven. His arms stay full the entire break—each time someone vacates, another person takes her or his place. Most of them had not heard the entire story. The air is thick with grief and love.

The defense has only two witnesses before April—a friend who testifies to April’s state of mind after his disappearance, and the neighbor he helped, who testifies that April was hovering over him and “seemed upset” when he was helping Castiel after the “accident.” Michael takes apart his testimony fairly easily, especially given the poor man doesn’t seem to want to be there, anyway. Castiel gives him a small smile as he exits. Finally, the last witness is called—April Novak. Castiel watches her take the stand and swear to tell the truth. As if that’ll make a difference. He leans back in his chair and waits.

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Dean’s had enough of this woman’s bullshit, and he hasn’t even heard her speak yet. First, she deigns to speak to Cas before court even begins. No, first she has the nerve to deny him the divorce. No, no, first she has the audacity to trick him into marrying her, then abuses him. What the fuck? Now she shuffles to the stand like she’s some sort of delicate, damaged waif.

“Mrs. Novak. Please tell us about your marriage.”

The Bitch proceeds to tell ridiculous lies and half-truths about how meeting Castiel was “kismet,” how she was “so happy” to get pregnant, and how their wedding, rushed as it was and nothing more than an exchanging of vows at City Hall, was “the happiest day of my life.” She tells the Court that she supported him when he quit his job and started his business.

“Things started going a little sideways after the miscarriage,” she claims. “I think he was very troubled by it. Sometimes he would think things were happening that weren’t. After the second miscarriage, he just seemed to give up on life. He didn’t talk to anybody unless it was work-related
and he started getting paranoid, thinking that I was lying to him or forcing him to do things or harming him. It broke my heart.”

“Could you give us an example?” her attorney asks. Dean chews on his tongue and folds his arms. He peeks at Cas, who is simply watching her with his hands folded.

“Many. He thought I was lying about the babies. He thought I was tracking his movements. He thought I tried to choke him. Choke him! As if I could do that to my husband! He even thought I was forcing him to have sex. How could I do that? He had erectile difficulties. That’s why he was on the Viagra he mentioned. I was so worried. I even got as desperate as to allow him to have sex outside of our marriage, just once, to see if maybe it was me…” She licks her lips and fiddles with her hands, as if she’s anxious or upset. She’d be very convincing if Dean didn’t already know what a lying bitch she is. Cas looks blank-faced, unaffected.

“And what happened?”

“One became several,” she sighs. “And then one night he came home, drunk, and he had a tattoo. He didn’t know how he got it and neither did I. I was very concerned after that and told him I wanted to get him some help, but he refused. And then he…” she sniffs as if she’s crying, but her eyes are dry, “he accused me of hitting him with our car on purpose. I knew then that he was very, very sick. I got him a dog to see if that would help him. I wanted the dog to be a therapy dog. He became very attached to it, always getting it groomed, calling it his baby. I think he thought of the dog as a substitute for the children we lost, as crazy as that sounds. And then one day he just… vanished. I looked everywhere I could think of and even reached out to his parents and his brother, but they claimed not to know anything. I hired a private investigator and everything, but he was just gone.” She looks up with a sad, regretful look in her eyes. Probably regretted that she couldn’t control him anymore, Dean thinks. He catches Cas shaking his head minutely. Her attorney thanks her profusely, offers her some water and tissues, and pats her hand before taking his seat. Michael stands.

“Ms. Novak—”

“Mrs. Novak.”

Michael clears his throat and sighs loudly. “Mrs. Novak. Your testimony was compelling, as most fictional stories are…” Dean snickers to himself. He kind of likes Cas’ attorney.

“Objection!”

“Withdrawn. Mrs. Novak, please explain why you didn’t receive any prenatal care for either of your pregnancies.”

“Castiel didn’t want me to.”

“He didn’t? He married you because you told him you were pregnant. He quit his job because you said you were sick. It sounds to me like he cared very much about your health during your alleged pregnancies.”

She shifts in her seat. Good. Fucking lying bitch, Dean thinks, taking joy in her discomfort. “Well, he knew I… I was nervous around doctors. Always have been.”

“I see. So how did you know you were pregnant?”

“One of those drugstore stick tests.”
“Ah. But you didn’t show it to Castiel? Either time?”

“No.”

“So there’s no evidence that you were ever pregnant.” He doesn’t really want her to answer, it seems, because he moves on. “And as for your attorney’s allegations that he married you for your money, I find it curious that he took only from his business account when he left, and is demanding nothing from you now. Don’t you find that curious?”

April’s attorney objects and Michael moves on, letting the insinuation hang in the air. April’s lips are pursed and she is looking away. He brings up her childhood and her mental health and legal history, which is extensive and eye-opening. Poor Cas. He addresses the physical and emotional abuse, which are difficult to prove because everything happened when they were alone. Dean remembers the same frustration when they dealt with getting a restraining order on Ruby, and that required much less evidence. He glances at Sam, whose eyes look vacant as he stares at April. He leans over and squeezes his brother’s knee. Sam looks at him and flashes him a quick, I’m okay sort of smile. He wishes he could reach out and comfort Cas, though truth be told he’s doing great on his own. Dean refocuses on Michael, who’s now talking about the sexual abuse. “Mrs. Novak, how do you explain the fact that Castiel never had a prescription for Viagra?”

“I didn’t ask questions. I assumed from his doctor.”

“And yet he has no medical records of any prescriptions or any doctor’s visits except for the time his leg was broken after you hit him with your car.”

“I—”

“Mrs. Novak, why would Castiel have ‘April’s bitch’ tattooed on himself?”

“Your Honor! Speculation!” her attorney barks as she answers, “I don’t know. He was… spiraling down. He was doing stupid things…”

“Mrs. Novak, explain to the court your opinion of why Castiel would go to the trouble of pursuing the grounds of cruel and inhuman treatment.”

“He believes I abused him. He’s very, very ill.”

Michael shakes his head and says, “Mrs. Novak, explain to me why several witnesses, as well as the family and friends here with him today, see Castiel as a healthy, sane individual.”

“I don’t know. He has them fooled, I guess. But he needs help, and as his wife, I just want to help him.”

“So he’s still delusional, is that what you’re saying?”

“Your Honor, the prosecution—”

“I’ll rephrase. Mrs. Novak, if Castiel was as sick as you are describing, then he would not be functioning effectively in his everyday life. But here he is, in a courtroom, after having gone through legal procedures to get here, taking time off from work that he is competent to do, supported by several people whose presence indicates that he is functioning well socially. So, I ask you, Mrs. Novak: What evidence do you have that Castiel Novak is delusional?”

“Because he’s lying!”
“One could say the same about you. No further questions.” Michael strides away, leaving April gaping on the stand. Dean wants to jump up and high five the attorney, but he doesn’t think he (or the judge) would go for that. They take a quick recess, only long enough to use the bathroom and grab some water. Cas doesn’t even leave the courtroom, conferring with Michael at their table, and Dean doesn’t approach him, wanting to keep some sort of decorum. Instead, he sits and stare daggers at the back of The Bitch’s head.

“Me too, bud.” Dean looks up to see Cas’ brother standing next to him, shaking and snarling at the woman at the defense table. Dean pats the hand that Gabe planted on his shoulder.

Soon they’re called back. Dean sits on the edge of his seat as the judge approaches the bench and Cas and his attorney stand, April and her attorney doing the same. His heart is racing. He peeks at the side of Cas’ face. Cas is exceptionally composed. Just like he is when he feels uncertain or unsafe. God, he wants to hold his hand right now. Instead, Dean holds Sam’s, Sam holds Jess’, Jess holds John’s, and on down the line, making a daisy chain of support. He’s pretty sure they’re all holding their breath.

“As to the case of Novak vs. Novak,” the judge announces, “this court finds in favor of the plaintiff and will grant the divorce on the grounds of cruel and inhuman treatment.” Dean watches Cas’ body sag, finally free after years of shackles. “And Ms. Novak. You have wasted the Court’s time. Defendant is commanded to pay the sum of the plaintiff’s legal fees. It is the very least you can do, Ms. Novak. Further, the defendant is to have no contact with the plaintiff. Court is adjourned.” Everyone rises and cheers (except The Bitch and her lawyer, of course), Dean cheering the loudest of all (but Gabe a close second).

Dean waits impatiently for Cas to shake his lawyer's hand and turn his way. When he does, Dean can’t even wait for him to come through the gate. He leans over the railing and takes Cas’ elated, relieved face in his hands. “You did it, sweetheart. You’re free.”

“I’m free,” Cas smiles with a wrinkled brow, as if he can’t quite believe it. “I’m really free.”

“You really are, sweetheart,” Dean assures him with a deep kiss that is probably inappropriate for court, but Dean can’t be bothered to care—especially since The Bitch is watching.

“Hey, my turn!” Gabe says as he paws Dean out of the way.

“Eww, Gabriel, no,” Cas jokes, then embraces his brother. Everyone else takes a turn as Dean watches fondly. Charlie, who insisted on being called when the proceedings were done, blows him kisses from Donna’s phone screen, which he returns. He talks to his dad, who cries, and his mom, who's happy that her son is happy. Dean’s heart feels like it’s going to burst.

“Dinner’s on us!” Gabe declares loudly.

As they make their way out, the reporters who’d been in the audience approach and ask why he decided to come forward now and why he chose the cruel and inhuman treatment grounds for divorce versus the no-fault grounds that New York finally passed a few years ago. Dean’s instinct is to step in front of Cas and protect him, but he doesn’t because, frankly, Cas is damn good at protecting himself. With Michael by his side, Cas answers, “Mr. Rogers once said, ‘Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable.’ I read those words but never quite took them to heart until I started living them. When I was able to talk about my feelings and share my experiences with people I trusted, things got better for me. This was about getting myself back, but it was also about telling other people who may be suffering abuse they are not alone and they do not need to be ashamed. As for why now, well, it’s because of all the people here with me.” He looks at Dean, then at their loved ones. “With their support and
my years of hard work, I finally got to the point where I could live my life again, and I wanted to live it in freedom. That's what this was about. I hope that someone else can learn something from my experience and have their own second chance, too.” Cas nods and smiles at the reporters, then takes Dean’s hand and cuts his way to the exit. Everyone meets outside and agrees on where to go for dinner, then Cas smiles and waves to their friends and family and tells them they’ll see them shortly before opening the car door and sliding into the back seat.

*The back seat? Dean’s forehead wrinkles in confusion as he opens the opposite door and slides in. “Cas?”*

Wide, watery blue eyes meet his. “Dean,” Cas rasps through trembling lips.

“Cas.” Dean opens his arms and pulls a sobbing Cas close to his heart. “It’s over, sweetheart. It’s over.”

Chapter End Notes

How are you all? <333

The quote is from “You Are Special: Neighborly Wit and Wisdom from Mister Rogers” by Fred Rogers.

*Warnings for references to:*
-Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (all previously mentioned)
-Mental health (derogatory language)
-Chaotic/abusive childhood (mentioned)
-Attempted psychological and legal manipulation, badgering/false accusations
-Thoughts of harming another (Dean toward April)
-Mentions of miscarriage
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

I can’t believe we’re almost at the end! :(

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The beginning of September is always a little bittersweet—it’s not really the end of summer yet, but the mind turns toward preparing for the cooler weather and routines of fall. For Castiel, this means fewer hours of daylight for outdoor projects, thoughts of preparing his workshop for more indoor work, and going back to school—not him, but his boyfriend. Dean took a couple of intensive classes over the summer, but now he’ll have a full course load. It’ll mean less time spent together, but it’ll also mean that Dean will be pursuing something he really wants to do, so he’s happy about the change overall. Plus he gets to make Dean blush by teasing him about his sexy brain that goes with his sexy body, so there’s that.

It’s been just over two months since his divorce trial, and now that they got word that the paperwork is signed and filed with the county clerk’s office, the cursed thing is finally over. He’s not pursuing additional legal charges, the potential strain too much for him to bear. He just wants to put the past behind him, and now, he’s truly a free man. Despite his fears, April has not tried to find him (to his knowledge), so every day he breathes a little easier. Tonight, they’re going out to celebrate—Dean’s new start and Castiel’s, too.

“So where to, handsome?” Dean asks, slinking his arms around him and scratching his back as he dresses. Dean smells heavenly and has the looks to rival any celestial being.

“Nowhere if you keep doing that,” Castiel says.

“Keep doing what?”

“Looking and smelling and feeling good.” He straightens Dean’s collar and smiles at the flush creeping its way up his neck.

“Ditto, sweetheart. Damn, look at you.” He eyes Castiel appreciatively, then nuzzles into his neck. “And ugh, they should bottle what you smell like, I swear to God.”

Castiel still feels a little shy when Dean gushes about him like that, but he wraps his arms around his boyfriend and leans into his touch anyway. “Now see, we would go out a lot more often if we could actually get out the door,” he jokes.

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean pouts. Castiel kisses it away, and that doesn’t help them get out the door any faster. They make out for a few minutes before they absolutely, positively have to leave or miss their reservation.

Dean’s interests are wide-ranging and varied, but he knows his boyfriend loves murder mysteries, so he brings them to a murder mystery dinner. Dean is giggling like a little kid as he gleefully watches the plot unfold, then turns serious as he theorizes over who did it and why. Castiel, who’s not big into murder mysteries in general, simply listens to his boyfriend and adds a few supportive words here or there. Dean is clearly in his element as he thinks about motives and backstories,
some of which Castiel is fairly certain he’s reading a little too much into. His switch to psychology as his major seems like a perfect fit for him. Dean is delighted when he guesses the killer correctly, and he explains to Castiel exactly how he knew. It’s all too endearing, and he can’t help but lean over and kiss his boyfriend’s cheek.

“What was that for?” Dean asks, smiling.

“For being you. You’re so smart and passionate.”

Dean’s smile falls as he stares at him. “You think so?”

“Of course I do,” Castiel says. “The way you can take a person or a situation and not just see the surface, but see under the surface, and the way you analyze things from multiple points of view… it’s not something everyone can do. You don’t give yourself nearly enough credit sometimes.”

Dean flags the server down for the check and Castiel wonders if he said something wrong. The intense look hasn’t left Dean’s face. He glances at the bill and won’t let Castiel contribute to it as he leaves enough to cover it plus a large tip, then takes his hand and gazes at him seriously. “We need to go home,” he says.

Nerves flutter in Castiel’s stomach as he reviews the last few minutes. What did he do? “Are you okay?” he asks hesitantly.

“Yup,” he answers. “Just don’t think all these nice people are gonna want to see me ravish you in the middle of the restaurant.”

Castiel sees the sparkle of love and the haze of want in his eyes. Ah. Dean loves it when his intelligence is recognized. In school and his first career, it was often overlooked or downplayed. He hovers next to his ear. “Well, then. Maybe you can analyze my point of view and figure out what makes me tick, hmm? What do you think, Professor Winchester?”

A tiny, high-pitched whine that Dean tries to swallow down answers him, and he knows he’s hitting the right buttons. Dean stands suddenly and knocks over his chair. Everyone turns at the clattering. “Sorry, sorry,” Dean waves to the other patrons before picking up his chair and pulling Castiel out the door. When they get to the car, Castiel laughs until Dean takes his breath away with a needy kiss, pressing him into the side of the vehicle. A year ago this would have made him panic and freeze, but now he breathes through it and soon finds himself enjoying the security of Dean holding him, loving him and keeping him safe. Dean must realize what he’s doing after a moment because he tries to pull away, but Castiel tugs him back and cups his ass with his hands. Another whine escapes from Dean’s throat. “We really have to get the fuck out of here,” he growls.

“All right, all right,” Castiel winks. Dean laughs and plants wet kisses along Castiel’s neck until he has to remind his boyfriend that he wanted to get home.

At home, the passion Dean exhibited for the murder mystery is turned to Castiel and multiplied to infinity. They barely get inside before Dean lifts him into his arms and starts carrying him toward the stairs. He stumbles when Cleo wraps around his legs in greeting, but regains his footing and resumes his mission. They burst through the door of their bedroom and hurriedly undress each other, then Dean presses Castiel onto the bed and follows him, his tongue laving every inch of flesh he can reach as they rut together. Castiel tries to reciprocate but can’t in his current position, so he stops trying and surrenders to Dean’s ministrations. His arms above his head and his relaxed muscles get Dean’s attention and seem to turn the man on even more, because he moans and strokes himself and blows Castiel like it’s the only thing he wants to do for the rest of his life (which isn’t a bad deal for Castiel at all). “What do you want, babe? I’ll give you anything you
want,” Dean rasps when he comes up for air.

Castiel thinks he’s quite happy with the current state of events, and yet something pops into his mind. He gets to his knees and kisses Dean soundly, then turns his back to him. “Fuck me,” he says.

Dean’s made love to him several times, but always facing each other because every time they tried this before, Castiel got scared and couldn’t do it. So he doesn’t blame Dean when he asks if he’s sure. But he wants to try again, and he wants to keep trying until they do it at least once. If he doesn’t like it after that, fine, but he needs to know that the reason is because of his preference and not because of fear. “I’m sure,” Castiel assures him.

Dean rubs his back and kisses the two cardinals in the tree, then kisses down his spine and back up. He stretches to the nightstand to get the lube, then lies on his side and gently encourages Castiel to lie next to him. When he does, Dean takes him in his arms and licks slow, deep kisses into his mouth as he preps him. Castiel could get off just with this, but he doesn’t want to. He writhes in Dean’s arms. “Ready, baby,” he says.

At first, the same thing happens that’s happened every time they try this—Dean gets close and Castiel’s old reactions make his breath catch and his body clench. Dean bends down and kisses him. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” Dean assures him, but the light and passion that Castiel loves so much, that filled his eyes and the room earlier, are clouded. No. There must be a way. Think, Castiel. What do you need? His eyes float to the large mirror they bought on their trip.

“I need to see you,” Castiel says. He smiles and nudges his chin toward the mirror. Dean looks over, then back. The clouds are starting to part.

“Yeah? You think?”

“Worth a try,” he says.

They move so that they’re kneeling upright at the foot of the bed, directly in front of the mirror that’s leaned artfully against the wall. Dean threads his arms around Castiel’s waist and jacks him with one hand while massaging his balls with the other. Castiel watches in the mirror and oh yeah, that’s it. He gulps as he feels his desire rising within him, manifested in his now rock-hard cock, and swears under his breath at the concentrated yet blissful look on Dean’s face as he caresses his neck with feathery movements of his lips. “Oh God, Dean, baby, please,” he whispers, making Dean look up and his eyes flare with desire. Castiel shifts onto his hands and knees and watches his lover’s eyes widen as he licks his lips. He slicks himself up and nudges against Castiel’s entrance, wanting so badly but being so careful, so considerate of Castiel that it makes him want to cry and scream at the same time. So Castiel makes the decision for him. He takes Dean in hand and slides himself fully onto Dean’s cock.

“Holy Mother of… sorry!” Dean cries, making Castiel huff a laugh through the burning his sudden movement created. He’s okay, though. Better than okay, he thinks as he watches Dean recover his faculties. “Are you okay? Are you okay?” his boyfriend asks. As good as Dean is at reading him, apparently he can’t quite read his mind yet.

“I’m great,” he reassures his ever-thoughtful boyfriend, who glides his hands over his body with gentle concern even now when the need to move must be killing him. He meets his eyes in the glass. “Go ahead, dear heart.”

Dean moves gently, slowly, and it’s beautiful. He gazes at his boyfriend and sees only love. This man will never, ever hurt him. He wants Dean to know that he knows this, that he sees Dean for
who he truly is and not through the lens of his shitty first marriage. *First marriage? Why did you say first? That implies... No. Maybe? Focus.* He shakes his head and ignores that voice for now, catching Dean’s eyes and saying playfully, “Come on, Professor, is that all you got?” Dean, taken aback, is about to answer when Castiel thrusts back into him. That passionate light he loves flares in his eyes and yeah, that’s what Castiel wants to see. “Come on, baby. Fuck me like you want me.”

He knows that will do it, and it does. Castiel forgets to be afraid and Dean forgets to be careful, and they fuck harder than they’ve ever fucked before, all with complete faith that underneath it all there is safety, trust, and love. Castiel watches his lover lose himself, his eyes rolling back as he chases his pleasure even while giving Castiel his with a lubed hand. Watching Dean, hearing him, feeling him… his senses are at full capacity, rapidly going into overdrive as Dean thrusts into him over and over. He cries out as sparks pop in his vision, and Dean opens his eyes. Their lust-hazy gazes meet in the mirror and for a split second Castiel is completely overwhelmed and uncertain — is this sort of love even real? Is it really his, and is he worthy? *Yes, Castiel. Yes. Yes. “Yes!”* he shouts, grabbing the back of Dean’s head and pulling him down with him as he collapses onto the bed, his orgasm filling his vision with blinding light. His love follows, calling out his name and clinging tightly to Castiel’s body. After a moment of recovery Dean pulls out gently, as he always does, then he snuggles into Castiel’s side and they rest for a while.

“I love you, dear heart,” Castiel murmurs. He threads his fingers between Dean’s and brings his hand to rest against his heart.

“I love you, sweet love,” Dean echoes, squeezing his hand. “God, I love you. You alright?”

Castiel turns in his arms. “I’m great,” he says, and he is, although something nebulous rolls into his brain. He ignores it, choosing to focus on his joy as Dean cleans them up, Cleo jumps on the bed, and the little family settles down to sleep.

And then, at 3:00am, the little family is woken by another little family, and his foggy thoughts become suddenly, sickeningly clear.

***

“Cas! Babe, wake up!”

Dean shakes his boyfriend awake. He hates to do it—after everything they shared just hours ago, something he knows Cas had worked up to for so long, all he wants to do is stay right here with him and show him how safe and loved he is—but this is important, too. “Jess is in labor!”

Cas pauses only a moment before he’s up and out of bed like a shot, even faster than Dean himself (and he was already sitting up after talking to Sam). He’s quiet but efficient, hurriedly finding his underwear, a pair of track pants, and a t-shirt and slipping them on. He turns and looks at Dean, who’s still trying to find his underwear.

“Dean, here,” he says, quickly gathering boxers, socks, jeans, and a tee out of the dresser and shoving them at him. “I’ll make sure Cleo has enough food and water. You get dressed. Meet me downstairs.” He sprints out of the room as Dean bounces on one leg, trying to get his jeans on.

“Relax, sweetheart,” Dean says when he catches up with Cas, who’s rushing around the kitchen. “She’s probably got a little while yet.”

“You’re not going to miss your niece’s birth,” Cas says, then busies himself with thawing breakfast burritos he’d made in advance “just in case.” He looks intense, too much so, and something about
what Cas said makes Dean feel unsettled.

“Hey,” Dean starts, but Cas shoves a burrito in his hand and practically pushes him out the door, so he drops it for now.

There’s no traffic at this hour, so the ride is quick and the parking easy. They both know this part of the hospital well, what with their visits to the babies. They find Jess’ room quickly, hearing the voices of Jess’ mom, stepdad, and Sam carrying out of the room. Jess looks peaceful as she lies in the bed, which is certainly not something Dean expected.

“Hypnobirthing,” Sam explains. “She’s kind of ‘in the zone’ right now.” When she finishes whatever she’s doing, she opens her eyes and greets them with a soft, tired smile.

“Hey girl, how’re you doing?” Dean asks.

“It’s getting harder,” she admits, “but I’m doing okay.”

That’s good,” Dean grins. “Because you might have to use your EMT skills to revive Sammy. He looks like he’s gonna pass out.”

“And it’s not even the worst of it yet,” she teases, grabbing her husband’s hand.

“I just want you to be okay,” Sam mutters.

“I know, sweetie. I’m—” Jess stops and begins some slow, steady breathing while her mother lays a hand on her belly.

“Contraction,” Sam mouths, then points to a screen with squiggly lines. Dean nods, fascinated.

“Okay,” Jess says when it’s over. “Cas, get over here. Why are you in the corner all by yourself?”

Cas smiles, tight-lipped, his hands jammed into his pockets. “Just trying to stay out of the way,” he explains. Dean’s brow furrows. Jess expresses what he doesn’t.

“You’re not in the way! Get over here and give me a hug!” she insists. Cas approaches and wraps his arms around her, then kisses her temple. “That’s better,” she says. They talk about “big brother” Sully, who’s at Benny and Andrea’s, until she closes her eyes suddenly and breathes through her next contraction. Cas holds her hand on one side, Sam on the other, while her mother rubs her feet.

As the sun rises, Jess rarely comes out of her “trance,” as Dean calls it. She’s not as peaceful as she was, either. She moans and writhes, pressing her back against the tub they moved her to a while ago. Sam is swallowing a lot, which tells Dean he’s feeling sick. When he asks if he’s feeling okay, he doesn’t answer, instead focusing on his wife but looking right through her.

Cas calls Sam’s name and says, “Why don’t we take you out for a breather? You look pale.”

“No…”

“Yes,” Jess says. “Go with Cas and Dean. I don’t want you passing out when our baby is born. My mom is right here. Go.”

Dean and Cas take his brother out of the room and down the hall to the waiting area. Pouring water into a tiny paper cone, Dean says, “You gonna make it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I just… it’s hard to believe this is really happening. A family. It’s all so surreal.”
“Yeah, it is. Can’t believe you’re gonna be a dad. You’ll be great.”

“Thanks, Dean. You’re gonna be a great uncle. Cas, too.”

“Yeah, he will.” Dean smiles at the thought of Cas holding their niece. In his peripheral vision, Cas squirms.

“It’s just hard to watch her be in pain,” Sam complains, drawing Dean’s attention back. He licks his lips and pulls at his hair. Cas, who has been keeping his distance, approaches quietly.

“Is this bringing anything up for you, Sam?” Cas asks.

Dean had never thought about that. Sam looks up and nods. Cas sits on his left and lays a hand on his arm. “What’s happening?”

“Watching her suffer… it’s just hard to take. And then when it’s over, I’m gonna have this little baby who relies on me for everything. Everything! What if I can’t hack it? I mean, I couldn’t even protect myself!”

Dean doesn’t know what to say. This is his brother, and he hates seeing him in any kind of pain. Fortunately, Cas knows.

“Sam.” Cas gently coaxes him to look his way. “Jess is in pain, yes, but it’s temporary and for a greater purpose. You aren’t causing her this pain. Bringing a new life into being… it creates pain. You and I both know that, don’t we? It wasn’t easy for us to create our new lives, but we did. Good ones, too, right?” Sam nods. “You’re probably always going to have doubts and fears, and you’re going to make mistakes. But I know you, Sam, and you are going to protect your daughter with your life. You are a wonderful husband, and you are going to be a wonderful father and have a wonderful family. You are a very lucky man, for so many reasons.”

“You’re right,” Sam says on a sigh. Dean rubs his back and doesn’t say anything. Cas said it all perfectly.

They get Sam back into the room, which has gotten crowded now that John and Mary are here as well as the doctor. Dean stands against the wall with Cas, John, and Jess’ stepdad. A couple of hours later, the four men step closer and witness Jess and Sam’s baby girl come screaming into the world, arms out and ready to take on whatever comes her way. Dean glances at Cas, who is smiling with the softest look in his eyes at the little one. Dean can’t help but smile, too. He’s so happy to have a niece. The only way he could be happier is… he slings his arm around Cas and kisses his cheek. Cas returns the gesture.

After a couple of hours of vaccinations and feedings and the parents and grandparents having their turns, it’s finally time for Uncle Dean to hold his baby brother’s baby. He can’t stop smiling as he cradles little Ava Rose Winchester. “Hey, sweetheart,” he coos. “How’s my niece, hmm?” He holds her entire hand on two fingers. “Look at her, Cas. Isn’t she perfect?”

“She is,” Cas agrees. He smiles down at her above Dean’s shoulder.

Dean snuggles Ava to his chest for a while, soaking in her warmth and her newness. Cas snaps several photos with his phone. “We should probably let them get some rest,” Cas says eventually. Dean reluctantly agrees.

Cas heads to the door while Dean stands to bring her to her parents, but he realizes something and stops. “You haven’t held her yet,” he says to Cas across the room.
Cas tries to beg off with a serene smile and an “it’s okay, she’s tired” and “next time,” which is strange since he nearly broke his neck to get here. There’s something wrong. Cas not wanting to hold a baby? His own niece? Impossible. He wanders closer. “Uncle Cas, look at me,” he says, giving Ava a very manly falsetto voice as he speaks for her. Cas chuckles but shakes his head and says the new family needs their rest. “Cas, come on,” Dean cajoles him quietly. “You really don’t want to hold her?”

“You’d better hold my baby, Cas!” Jess demands from his left. “And Dean, get a picture!” The grandparents also encourage him to take her, probably thinking he’s just a nervous dude who doesn’t want to hold an infant even though Dean knows better.

Alright, alright,” he grins jovially and gives in, holding his arms out. While Cas talks to the baby, Dean quickly digs his phone from his pocket and takes several photos of a smiling Cas with an almost-sleeping Ava. He shuffles through to decide which one he’ll make his lock screen while Cas moves to the window with Ava in his arms. They’re all gorgeous to look at, but they don’t feel right. There’s something… oh. He hasn’t seen the fake smile in a while, and Cas is so good at it that it even fooled Dean. Almost. He walks to Cas, who’s rocking the baby and staring out the window. His eyes are glassy and far, far away.

“Cas?” Dean whispers, wrapping his arms around him.

“Your niece is so precious, Dean,” he murmurs, gazing down at the baby in his arms.

Dean frowns. That’s what was weird about what he said earlier. “Hey. Don’t you mean our niece?” Cas glances at him but says nothing, choosing to move Ava onto his shoulder and cuddle her in his large, tender hands. “Cas?”

“I’m not really her uncle, Dean,” he whispers.

“Of course you are,” Dean says.

“We’re not married.”

“Hey.” Dean turns him and holds him gently in his arms, little Ava between them. “It doesn’t matter. You’re my family. Our family. If I went and asked my folks, if I asked Sam and Jess, they would say the same.” He pulls them closer and sways them side to side, nuzzling his nose against Cas’ until he gets a real smile. And speaking of… “Smile,” he says, lifting his phone. Dean takes a picture he can’t wait to make his lock screen—Cas snuggling Ava, Dean snuggling Cas. He snaps a second picture of Cas shyly turning his gaze back to Ava, then a third of him kissing the baby’s head. Much better.

Cas returns their niece to Jess before they say their goodbyes and head home. When they plop onto the couch, Dean is suddenly exhausted from the early wake-up call. But more than that, he’s worried about Cas. He invites him to cuddle in his arms, which he does. “What brought all that on?” Dean asks.

“Brought what on?”

“The family thing. The marriage thing. You have to know after everything that you’re family, Cas.”

“I guess.”

“You guess?” Dean sits up, which jostles Cas and forces him upright, too. “You guess? Cas! We love each other. We’re living together. We have a cat together!”
“I know,” he murmurs.

“So what’s this about?”

“I don’t know!” he cries, voice strained. “I just—I have the perfect life, Dean. It’s perfect. Everything… being in love, living together, Cleo. I’m free of April. I was finally able to have sex with you last night the way I wanted to. Business is good, I’ve cut back on therapy, we have our friends and family, and now we have Ava. I’m just… when will you want what Sam and Jess have? When will I lose you?” Tears make his blue eyes shimmer. “What if I can’t give you what you want?”

“Do you mean marriage?” Dean asks. Cas nods. “Sweetheart, I’ll be straight with you. Well, I’ll never be straight with you, I guess,” he jokes. Cas rolls his eyes but can’t even muster up an unimpressed arch of his brow or a begrudgingly amused smirk, so Dean grimaces and continues, “I want to marry you. I’ve wanted to marry you for a while. And I know it’s too soon. We haven’t even been dating a whole year yet, and it’s only been a couple of months since the divorce trial. Plus I have school to get through and you have a business to, like, solidify, you know? And I dunno, I kinda thought you didn’t want to ever get married.”

“But you do.”

“I do.” I do… really, Dean? Could you make this any more awkward than you already have? And here you thought this new carrier pigeon was working out. “Ugh. You know what I mean!”

“I know.” His little smile makes Dean feel less foolish.

“Listen. I love you, Cas, and I’m committed to you. You’re it for me, forever, and though I’d like to put a ring on it, I don’t have to. As long as I know you’re as committed to this as me, that’s all I need. And I know you are, so.” He shrugs, not knowing what else to say. Does he want to marry Cas, to have the white picket fence and the 2.5 kids and the dog and cat? Yeah, he does. But he can have the rest of it without the marriage license, if Cas wants it. He’s disappointed, but disappointment fades. What’s important isn’t the legal commitment, but the heart and soul commitment.

“What if you change your mind, though?” Cas asks in a tiny, vulnerable voice.

He’s reminded of what Cas said just a moment ago, which he’d forgotten in the talk about marriage— when will I lose you? “You don’t have to be afraid of that. You’re not going to lose me,” he assures him.

“But I am afraid.”

“I know,” Dean says, pulling him close and kissing his forehead. “Sometimes I’m scared, too, like if I blink too much or sneeze too hard it’s all gonna disappear. Then I remember how hard we’ve worked at this, you know? It wasn’t magic or luck that got us here, and it’s not gonna be what keeps us here. It’s hard work and commitment, wedding ring or not. We’re together because we made it so. We’re family because we made it so. We’ll stay together because we make it so.”

“You might get sick of putting aside what you want for me.”

“Let me decide that, okay? Besides, it could go in reverse. You could want to get out of this.”

“I won’t! I love our life!”

“And I do, too. Please trust me. Trust that we love you. Trust that you are our family. Trust that
this isn’t going to disappear.” He kisses his boyfriend softly.

“I do. I’m sorry.” Cas shifts and settles into Dean’s arms, just where he always wants him. “I guess last night brought up all the fears and insecurities I thought I’d gotten over.”

*Oh. Right.* “I thought you were okay?”

“I was, and I am, just… things flare up sometimes.”

Dean nods. “Yeah, I know. Like you told Sam, though, creating a new life hurts sometimes, or something. Change is hard and all that.” Dean’s face heats. He’d wanted to be a hell of a lot more eloquent.

“You’re right.”

“You’re right. You’re the one who said it.”

“Well, not quite like that, but yes.” Dean pouts at Cas’ teasing, but secretly he’s happy they’re finding their footing again. “Sorry I made things weird. I love you, dear heart.”

“You didn’t. I was just worried about you. Love you, sweetheart.” He aims to kiss Cas’ brow but gets his eyelid instead.

“Weirdest feeling ever,” Cas laughs, rubbing his eye. And since Cas is laughing, Dean does it again, and again after that, until they’re tangled together in a giggling, aroused mess of imperfect, messy love. Dean’s about to suggest they move their activities upstairs when Cas grows serious and palms his cheek. “I’m not saying never. Don’t give up on me, okay?”

Dean gets serious too as he gazes into the most vulnerable blue eyes he’s ever seen. He doesn’t want to hurt him, but he also knows Cas values honesty and transparency above just about everything. He has to tell him the whole truth, no pushing his own feelings aside or hiding them just to spare Cas’ feelings. They’ve worked on this. “You know how I feel and what I want, and that won’t change, I swear. You’re it for me. But I can’t ask you to marry me if I’m not sure you’ll say yes, because I don’t think I can bear if it you say no or even not yet,” he answers honestly. “But sweetheart, I’ve never given up on you, and I never will,” he vows. “I promise.”

He waits tensely for Cas’ reaction. Cas nods, then grabs his face and climbs on top of him, kissing him until he can’t breathe. “Considering your own feelings and mine,” Cas says breathlessly. “Sexy.” He winks and Dean laughs. Ring or not, Dean knows they’re in it together, forever.

Chapter End Notes

I went back to almost the beginning of the story to check on something and...wow. They have come such a long way, even considering the occasional flare-up. I almost forgot just how far, honestly. Thank you for walking this journey with them and with me. See you next time for our final chapter. <3
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Wow, I can’t believe it’s over! Heartfelt stuff at the end, as well as a preview of my next longer work. :) No warnings for this chapter other than bring your tissues. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three years later

Christmas has always been special in Castiel’s family. When he was little and the family was larger and most of them lived in Rhode Island, they all got together and had a festive gathering on Christmas Eve with food and stories, then went to Mass at midnight and exchanged gifts after. The morning was reserved for the four of them, and the brothers played with their toys and picked at Christmas Eve leftovers before the more traditional dinner in the evening. The tradition changed over the years until they didn’t really have much of a tradition anymore. Now, Castiel realizes they’ve established a tradition once again—not intentionally, but rather organically as their families have truly become one.

“Heads up, Cassie!” Gabe calls, tossing wrapping paper at him from across the room. Dean and Castiel are hosting Christmas Day activities this year so that Sam and Jess, busy parents of one with a second on the way, didn’t have to. The scene in the living room is chaotic—gifts and paper everywhere, family members all talking at once, Sully sniffing at anyone who smells like the dinner they ate earlier, their own pup Nyssa chewing on her new toys and everyone’s toes while Cleo sleeps through it all—and Castiel wouldn’t have it any other way. He catches the paper Gabe tossed to him, pushes it into a box for recycling, and goes to the kitchen to get a drink.

“Uncle Cas, can I have water?” his niece Ava asks.

“Of course, sweetie,” he says. He picks her up so she can reach for a “big” cup, then fill it from the tap. Her job done, he smacks a loud smooch onto her cheek and sets her down. He looks after her with affection. He loves being her uncle.

Castiel wanders back toward the living room but stops in the doorway to watch his love as he tells a story about his latest adventures at his practicum (without breaking confidentiality, of course). Dean is working with adolescents at a couple of residential treatment programs doing adventure-based and equine therapy work. It’s new and it’s hard, but he loves it. He’ll be graduating in the spring with his Master’s in Social Work and will become a licensed therapist. Castiel thinks about Mia and how much she helped him and smiles, then thinks about Dean’s eternal sunshine and optimism and smiles wider. Dean will make a fantastic therapist. Even if he’s still learning theory and technique, his intentions are pure and honest.

A lot of things in life are about intention, Castiel muses. Fire can destroy or provide life-sustaining heat. Hands can inflict pain or provide comfort. Marriage can tie you down or tie you together. He stops short in his thoughts. It really is all in one’s intent, isn’t it? Castiel used to think that marriage was unnecessary. He still doesn’t think it’s necessary, strictly speaking. But most things in life are wants, not needs, aren’t they? And Dean wants to be married.

What is Dean’s intention? Castiel believes it is simply to spend the rest of their lives together in a
way that is both a public commitment and a private one. He knows all too well that it’s easy to have the public commitment without the private one. But that’s not Dean, and that’s not Castiel, either. Dean has never asked Castiel to marry him, yet Castiel knows Dean’s desire, knows what he truly wants. So why should Dean have to be the one to put his heart on the line and ask? This is something he can do that would make Dean so, so happy. He deserves to be the happiest he can be… and damn it, Castiel does, too.

*What is your intention, Castiel?* He’s thought a lot about marriage since he’s known Dean, but always thought that having freedom was his ultimate goal, as if marriage and freedom were mutually exclusive. In his first marriage, they were. But they don’t have to be, do they? He feels plenty of freedom in their relationship, and he doesn’t think that will change. He believes that marriage would simply strengthen an already strong, committed, loving relationship, giving them both greater legal and emotional security. A smile spreads across Castiel’s face. Yes, Dean wants this, but… Castiel realizes he wants this, too. He wants to marry Dean. He is free to marry Dean. And what is freedom worth if you don’t use it?

Castiel crosses the room slowly, watching Dean the entire time. It’s only when he’s a few inches from him that Dean turns and smiles, then stops. “Cas?” he asks cautiously, scanning him in that singular attention he always gives him. God, he loves this man.

“Can I hold your hands?”

Dean raises his brows and gives him his hands. His expression changes from curiosity to shock and hopefulness as Castiel drops to one knee. Their family is quiet save for hushed gasps and a squeal (from Jess, if he had to guess).

“Dean,” he says, his voice vibrating in his ears not out of fear, but out of joy and wonder that he ever came to this moment, “I don’t have a ring or a speech or even a great reason why you should marry me. All I can tell you is that I love you and I want to spend my life with you, committed to you in every way possible. Will you marry me?”

Dean’s eyes are shining prisms, and their refracted light bathes Castiel in love. He lowers himself to his knees. “Sweetheart, we don’t have to do this. Not ever if you really don’t want to. I know we’re committed to each other.”

“Dear heart,” Castiel whispers, caressing his cheek. He knows Dean means every word, yet he also knows Dean’s heart, knows the hope in his eyes, has seen that hope before. He gets an idea then, another gift he can give Dean: the gift of a sure thing, an effortless answer he doesn’t have to wait for. He had to wait for so much from Castiel. He looks him straight in the eyes and says, “Ask me.”

“Ask you?”

Castiel nods and smiles. Dean licks his lips, peering into his eyes, searching them. “Do you want to marry me, Cas?”

“I do,” he grins. “Yes. Every day, every time you ask. Yes.”

Dean collapses into his arms, sinking his teary face into Castiel’s neck. They stay that way as their family and friends clap and cheer for them. It’s an incredible feeling to be this loved, one Castiel will never take for granted ever again. However, he still has one outstanding question on his mind. When Dean lifts his face to kiss him, he says, “So, Dean, you never actually answered *my* question.”
Dean sits back. “I didn’t?”

“No,” Castiel smiles. “And while I’d understand if you wanted to keep me waiting…”

“Hell no,” Dean blurts.

“Hell no, you won’t marry me?” Castiel asks, teasing his future husband. The thought of Dean as his husband makes him smile even more.

“No! I mean yes! I mean I’ll marry you! Goddamn carrier pigeon! Sorry,” Dean babbles. It’s utterly adorable, and though he’s not sure what pigeons have to do with anything, Castiel can’t help but to gather Dean into a kiss. It’s probably a little deeper than is polite in front of company, but fuck it, he’s getting married and he’s happy about it.

“We’re gonna be married,” Dean grins when they part.

“I can’t wait,” Castiel grins back.

Just after New Year’s, Castiel sits and sips tea in a chair that wasn’t here the last time he was, over two years ago now. The old, familiar furniture is gone, replaced with something new. How fitting, he thinks.

“Your call was a surprise,” Mia says softly, not betraying any judgment or emotion.

“I figured it would be. It’s been a long time.”

“It has,” she says. “So, Castiel, what brings you here?”

His face nearly splits apart in joy, so happy is he both at the news he’s going to deliver and to whom he’s going to deliver it. She was with him through his darkest hours. He felt it only right that she should see him in his brightest. “I just wanted to tell you in person that I asked Dean to marry me and he said yes. We’re getting married in July.”

Mia’s eyes widen and a dark curl falls in her face as her hands fly to her cheeks. “You what? Oh, Castiel!” she cries. He laughs at her completely spontaneous reaction. “Oh my goodness,” she says, composing herself but smiling widely. “This is a surprise. How did you come to this decision?”

He tells her about his thoughts over the years, how it all cleared up for him on Christmas Day, and his proposal. “So I just knew it was right for me,” he finishes. “And I wanted to come here to tell you, because you helped me so much. I never would have gotten to this point without your help, and I wanted you to know how everything turned out.” He grins wickedly. “Plus I wanted to see your reaction and I have to say, totally worth it.”

She laughs heartily at his teasing even as she brushes away teardrops around her lashes. “Thank you for sharing this with me,” she says when she composes herself once again. “I hoped you would have a happy ending, Castiel.”

“It’s been quite the story,” he says, thinking back to Dean’s analogy from their first date, “and I’m happy to say it’ll never end.”

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The late July sun shines through the few lazy afternoon clouds scattered across the sky, making their scalloped edges look like the lacy borders of children’s handmade valentines. Seems appropriate, Dean thinks. He grins foolishly as he lifts his finger to the sky and writes Cas + Dean.
It’s his wedding day. He wasn’t sure the day would ever come, and once he started dating Cas, he was certain it wouldn’t. Cas told him, early on, that the idea of being legally bound felt like his choice was taken away. That, plus all the abuse he suffered, pretty much nixed any dreams Dean had of getting married. If he couldn’t marry Cas, he didn’t want to get married at all.

The backyard is decked out for the wedding, the centerpiece being the garden arch Cas built. At the top of the arch he carved “Second Chances” and “New Life,” the phrases separated by their initials and a heart. It’s the capstone to his memorial garden project, Amara’s Garden, which he started the first summer they lived together, right after he won the court case over his ex. They haven’t talked about her much since that day, and the effects of her abuse have receded over time. Thank God.

And speaking of God, or His representative, at least… the minister walks toward him, Charlie by her side. She introduced Cas to her non-denominational church and they attend with her sometimes, more so since her mom passed away last year. Charlie’s become a frequent visitor to the house, too, and Cas has been teaching her a few things. In fact, during some of his free time from his business, he started a beginner woodworking class out of the workshop in the backyard for some of the neighbors. It started with their female friends, then some of the guys, and now several more neighbors have joined in. It’s been a fun way to get to know the neighbors. Cas is a great teacher, and he’s been encouraging him to teach one of those Adult Education classes. He’s still thinking about it.

“Hey! Itchin’ for a hitchin’?” Charlie jokes affectionately. Pastor Diana laughs.

“I sure am,” Dean smiles. “How are you, Diana?”

“I’m very well, thank you. I’m delighted to be with you and Castiel for your special day. Beautiful one, too,” she smiles as she peers at the sky.

“Sure is,” Dean agrees.

“Any day is a beautiful day to marry Cas, right?” Jess says behind him, his parents, brother, and niece laughing next to her. Tanner, his nephew, is cradled in Sam’s arms. He grins and nods bashfully, knowing he probably looks like a lovesick goofball (which he is, but they don’t need to be so obnoxious about it).

“We’re very happy for you, sweetheart,” his mother says as she gives him a hug. “Dad and I are so proud of both of you.”

“Love you, son,” his father says after a hug of his own. He smiles his thanks before they leave to take their seats.

After conferring about the ceremony with Diana, Ollie and Beth approach him. Dean rubs his hands together and takes a few deep breaths. “Cas ready?”

“He is,” Ollie confirms with a smile. “He looks good. Doesn’t he look handsome, Beth?”

“Oh, my baby boy is so handsome,” she agrees. “He’s getting married to Dean!”

“Yes, he is,” his soon-to-be father-in-law says with a chuckle.

“He loves Dean,” she says matter-of-factly. Her simple statement brings Dean’s nerves way down. Cas loves him. He wants to marry him. Nothing to worry about.
But is Cas sure he wants to marry him? Is he doing this just for Dean? Oh God. Now he feels like throwing up.

“Relax,” Ollie says with a wry twist of his lips. “He gave up ten dogs for you.” Dean smiles, but he doesn’t truly relax until Ollie leans in and says, “He’s excited, Dean. All he can talk about is how he can’t wait to see you. He’s driving his brother crazy.” Dean’s smile widens and he hugs them both before being called to get started.

Dean stands on one side of a fieldstone path awaiting Cas, who will be on the other end. When Cas turns the corner, he feels like a soda bottle that’s been shaken. My heavenly view, he thinks as he giggles out of pure nervousness and joy. They’re really doing this. An instrumental version of “Come Away With Me” plays softly in the background as they walk toward each other in matching suits (that are coming off as soon as the pictures are over, because fuck it’s hot out here in these things). Cas is even wearing a tie, which is a total surprise. His hand brushes it when they meet under the arch. “Only once, and only for you,” Cas murmurs. He leans in. “And don’t get any kinky ideas,” he whispers in Dean’s ear. “We have guests and won’t be able to fulfill them for several hours.”

It’s taken a long time for Cas to joke about that kind of thing, and it’s been a huge step in his healing. As if Cas uncaps him, Dean bursts forth with a spray of laughter, the pressure of his anxiety and the years of hard work and uncertainty spewing forth in foamy giggles. Unfortunately, once he starts he has a hard time stopping, and the giggles keep coming no matter what he does. Cas doesn’t help, either. Instead of putting on a solemn expression as he usually would, Cas winks or wiggles his brows or makes faces at him. Dean attempts to admonish him through clenched teeth posing as a smile, but can’t stop laughing long enough to be taken seriously. The positive out of the whole thing, though, is that Cas is laughing, too, and they’re able to forget their nervousness. They didn’t have a reason to be nervous, anyway, not really.

The vows are beautiful, all about choice and freedom and supporting each other. Everyone cries. Dean expected to, but actually keeps it together pretty well. It’s when they get to the rings that he becomes a weeping mess.

“Dean and Castiel have chosen to tattoo their rings on their fingers as their symbols of commitment to each other,” Diana announces to their guests. They had talked about this some time ago, deciding that it would be easier and safer for Cas given his job. Cas also liked the permanence of it, which Dean loved (and yeah, that made him cry a little when they talked about it). Dean even knows what to expect because this isn’t his first tattoo. For Valentine’s Day two years ago, Dean surprised Cas by getting a fence tattooed around his bicep, with two cardinals sitting on the top. Cas loved it (and man, he still remembers the sex they had that night—Cas really worked him over, damn). This one will be the first tattoo they get together, though. He never pictured his wedding ring quite this way, but it feels right.

Their family and friends watch as the men prepare to get identical patterns inked around their left ring fingers—branches winding around the lower third, symbolizing strength and never-ending growth. Cas gets his first. When Dean thinks his is finished, Dean prepares himself—but he doesn’t prepare himself nearly enough.

“Still want it, sugar?” Pam asks Cas.

“Yes,” he says, then turns to Dean. “Benny told me once never to tattoo the name of the person I think is forever on my body,” he chuckles. “But I don’t think you’re my forever. I know you are. So I’ve asked Pam to tattoo your name into my ring here.” He shows Dean and their guests the inside of his finger, where the back of a ring would rest. “Holding hands is kind of our thing, so
this way, I can hold you in my hand all the time.” He smiles gently, or Dean thinks he does. It’s hard to tell because his vision is so blurry.

“Cas, shit… I mean, I’m sorry, fuck, I… damn it!” Dean stammers. Cas thumbs away his tears, as tenderly as he did the first time they went to look at the stars together, and Dean can’t wait—he surges forward, gathering Cas up and kissing him in between tender words of love.

Pam finishes Cas’ tattoo and it’s even better than Dean imagined it would be. Dean’s name stands out amongst the branches, wrapped in them like a hug. “Me too, please,” his raspy, watery voice requests when it’s his turn. Soon after, Cas is entwined in branches, always safe in Dean’s hand. Their tattoos are blessed, final words are said, and then he’s in Cas’ arms in their first embrace as husbands. There’s no place he’d rather be.

The party in the backyard is perfect for them—their closest friends and family, the people who have supported them, all gathered to celebrate a love and a life the men have truly earned. Neither of them felt the need to go all out with the traditional wedding stuff—the cake isn’t some multi-tiered fountain and they don’t have a band or even a DJ or a proper dance floor. Instead, they eat vegan barbeque food (no one seems to mind) and swim in the pool (Cas swims unselfconsciously without a shirt and it still makes Dean’s throat tighten a little). However, Cas does insist on one tradition.

“May I have this dance?” his gorgeous husband (he can’t stop saying husband in his head) asks, presenting his hand in invitation.

“Of course,” Dean says gallantly. He lets Cas pull him off the deck chair and take him in his arms. He sees Gabe fiddling with Cas’ phone, which is connected to speakers and has been providing the background music. Dean waits for the familiar piano opening of their song. But instead, he’s greeted with a song he hasn’t heard since his childhood. It sounds familiar, but he can’t place it. Confused, he looks to Cas, who smiles softly and starts singing:

_It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood_  
_A beautiful day for a neighbor_  
_Would you be mine?_  
_Could you be mine?_

Cas caresses his face as he sings _Would you be mine?_ and Dean’s eyes well up. Leave it to Cas to make a song from _Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood_ sound like a love song. He can’t tear his watery eyes away from Cas’ gentle, grinning face.

_I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you_  
—Cas taps him on the chest—  
_I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you_  

Dimly, Dean notices that everyone is singing along now, but he only has eyes for one neighbor.

_So let’s make the most of this beautiful day_  
_Since we’re together, we might as well say_  
_Would you be mine?_  
_Could you be mine?_  
_Won’t you be my neighbor?_

Cas stops dancing and takes Dean’s face in his hands, wiping away Dean’s tears but letting his fall.
He sings softly:

Won't you please
Won't you please
Please won't you be my neighbor?

Their family and friends laugh and clap as Dean joins his lips to Cas'. “Sky Full of Stars” starts immediately after, and everyone joins the happy couple on the lawn to dance, though it’s the middle of the song before they even separate enough to notice.

“I hope our kids love Mr. Rogers as much as I do,” Cas smiles.

Dean nods. “Me t—what?”

Cas’ eyes sparkle like sunlight on the sea. “Ask me,” he says.

Dean’s grinning so widely he’s not sure he can form words. “Tomorrow,” he says finally, holding his husband’s face in his hands. “Today is for us.” He meets Cas’ lips in a soft kiss. “I love you, neighbor,” Dean grins.

“Love you, neighbor,” Cas laughs.

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Funny how you can live in a neighborhood and not know your neighbors, the people who have their own sorrows and their own joys, just like you. All of the little details, the minutiae of life, get lost if you let them. But Castiel knows a few more things than he used to.

There’s the White Hairs Club two streets down, consisting of Mildred, Thérèse, and Jeannine. They still sit outside in nice weather and speak Canadian French, though Jeannine’s husband is now in a nursing home and cannot join them.

On that same street, there’s Benny, who still watches the Red Sox loudly, and his wife Andrea, who puts up with it good-naturedly. They like to cook and play cards and they’re kind to their neighbors, both human and animal. They are very good friends.

On his street, three houses away, there’s Donna, who sold the luxury car, bought herself a more practical vehicle, and took a vacation with the money left over. Her ex, Captain Jerkface, is no longer around, but she has a new person in her life and is much happier. She is a very good friend, too.

Across the street there used to be an elderly, mostly homebound couple. There is now a For Sale sign on their lawn, as they’ve both gone to assisted living facilities. Next door is Charlie, whose mail he still receives sometimes. He returns it to her whenever they get together, which is often. She is the only person living there now, though a woman she’s been dating for a while looks promising. Charlie is a very good friend, as well.

Next door there’s a lonely man who still complains about leaves falling on his driveway, but is quieter on the issue since Castiel befriended him with cookies and a listening ear. He doesn’t push snow into their yard anymore.

On the other side of him, there are Sam, Jess, Ava, and Tanner, four wonderful people that Castiel is happy to call family. There used to be an old black car in their driveway sometimes. Now that black car is parked in Castiel’s driveway. Their driveway.
And in his home—their home—there is his husband Dean, the man with the old black car who was very neighborly indeed, the man who made him believe in the goodness of people and the capacity of the human heart to love even when it feels impossible.

He lives his life at the same time as these people, their lives now intertwined by choice. His life still isn’t perfect, but he is alive — and even better, he feels alive. He isn’t reasonably content the way he believed he was before he met the man with the old black car. He didn’t know what contentment was then. Now he is truly happy, thanks to his neighbors, his friends, his family, his husband… and yes, thanks to himself. He has overcome.

Chapter End Notes

Referenced in this chapter:
“Come Away With Me,” Norah Jones
“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” Fred Rogers
“Sky Full of Stars,” Coldplay

Oh, my lovelies! Thank you from my very soul for your support of me and this work. Neighborly is, as I shared at the beginning, a story that deals with difficult subject matter but is also, at its heart, a story of healing. Many of you have shared your stories, and many others have read without sharing, but either way, please know you were all in my heart when I wrote this.

I am always so bowled over and humbled by the support you give me, but also so impressed with the support you give each other as well as the characters. Some of you wrote little notes on each others’ comments, and I loved seeing the interactions. I also loved hearing how proud you were of Cas and/or Dean, or seeing you cheer them on.

I will confess that when I started this story, I did not think they were going to get married, for two reasons: one, I had the thought that “They (almost) always get married in my stories!” and I thought I’d shake it up, and two, I really didn’t know where Cas would go in terms of his healing. This is proof that I don’t really control their journey all that much, lol! I loved watching our boys grow as much as you hopefully did.

So thank you, one and all. I hope this has brought you something meaningful, whether a smile, a warmth in your heart, or something deeper. Love to you all. <3

If you liked this, feel free to subscribe to me if you’d like to read more of my work. If you want to follow me on Twitter, I’m @followourenergy. I’ve made exactly one post so far. One or two of you may have my other one. I promise I’ll be just as boring on this one. On Tumblr (such as it is), I’m followourenergy. Original, hmm?

And, for a preview of my next longer work (debuting around the New Year), see below! (Before that, though, I’ll have a fluffy little Christmastime gift for you. <3)

Push/Pull

Dean Winchester suffers from psychological rope burn, the imaginary ties digging into him with every pull from his resentment, his guilt, and his desire to have a life for himself. His Uncle Bobby’s home care needs lead Dean to Cas Novak, an attractive
bastard of a nurse who likes to push—his agenda, his luck, his belief that Dean and Bobby deserve more than what they’ve allowed themselves. As the men allow Cas to transform their lives, Dean feels a pull of a different sort—the pull of connection, of affection, of more. Dean wants to pull Cas closer...but just as Cas is good at pushing people toward their best selves, he’s also good at pushing away his own happiness. Can Dean and Cas push and pull their way to a life together?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!