Push/Pull

by followyourenergy

Summary

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?
Hello, lovelies! So happy to have you here!

In this story, Bobby has multiple sclerosis that has advanced to the point of quadriplegia, which means he cannot move his arms or legs on his own. There are different forms of MS and it affects everyone a bit differently. His condition is based on my mother’s condition. Feel free to ask questions. :)

Also, there will be some sensitive issues discussed later in the story. I’ll provide warnings.

Posting on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Enjoy! <3
Chapter 1

“I can’t do it anymore. He’s a fucking jerk. Sorry.”

Dean Winchester plants his elbows on the desk and rubs his tired face. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“Sure. Sorry again.”

The exhausted man hangs up and sighs. At least this one called instead of just not showing up. He’s not surprised that she’s quitting, really. He’s more surprised that she lasted as long as she did. Three whole weeks. The record is two months, and that lady was very, very patient (although not really great at her job, he found out later). He looks at the clock. Nearly noon. He sighs again and calls in an order to the pizza place around the corner, then gathers his keys and heads out the door. “I’ll be back, guys,” Dean calls into the bays. A couple of grunts echo back through the cavernous space. Good enough.

Arriving home with pizza and a stern lecture in his head, he opens the door to his Uncle Bobby. “Pushed another one out?” Dean grinds out through gritted teeth. He tries to be patient, he really does.

“Just a kid,” Bobby says. “Didn’t know what the hell she was doing.”

“How can she not know how to pick up a damn fork and bring it to your mouth?” Dean opens the pizza box and offers Bobby a bite of the first slice, taking a second slice and stuffing half of it into his mouth in one go. “I mean it’s not brain surgery,” he mumbles through the meat and cheese.

“Doubt that girl coulda put a bandaid on my big toe, never mind brain surgery,” Bobby grumbles. He takes the next bite Dean offers. “She asked me how to use the Hoyer lift, Dean. Askin’ the patient. Don’t they train these people?”

“I don’t friggin’ know, but Jesus, you could’ve told her how to do it.”

“It ain’t my fault she don’t know how to do it.” He chews a third bite, then continues, “Besides, I was fine. Told her that, but then she wanted to check my pants like I’m a damn infant. I told her where to stick her nose instead.”

“They need to check and change you. It’s their job.” Dean gives Bobby another bite. “Wait, how does she not know how to use the Hoyer? Hasn’t she changed you at all the last three weeks?” When Bobby won’t look his way, Dean growls, “Bobby...”

“Didn’t want her to. ‘Sides, I’ve been fine waitin’ ‘til you get home.”

Dean pinches between his brows. “You can’t do that, Bobby. You've let other people do it, haven’t you? Why not her?”

“I don’t ‘let’ anybody do it. They just do it,” he mumbles.

Dean shakes his head. “Fuck. Now I’ve gotta do this shit all over again.” Hurrying so he can get back to work, he shoves the second half of his slice into his mouth, chokes on it, and spits it into his napkin.

“Don’t take so damn much in one bite, ya idjit.”
“Thanks, I’ll remember that,” Dean snipes.

His mind is already thinking ahead to setting up interviews. When they first started this business he went through home health agencies, but they were so unreliable that Dean grew tired of it quickly. He called their local Agency on Aging and spoke to someone about a way that he could hire and manage his own workers and still have it paid by the state and federal waiver program that provides Bobby’s insurance and pays for his home care. The workers were better and Bobby seemed a little happier about it all. Well, more cooperative. Until recently, anyway. In the last year his health has declined, and at the same time Dean’s workload has increased thanks to an increase in business (good), decrease in staff (bad), and a need to replenish their rainy day fund from Bobby’s loan to Dad before he left (loan bad, leaving good). It’s been tough on Bobby, who was used to having Dean around to help him more, and tough for Dean, who is feeling pulled in all directions at once. He feels guilty that he can’t be around to give him the help he needs or just keep him company, but he’s gotta do what he’s gotta do if they’re going to keep a roof over their heads.

“How can’t keep doing this, Bobby,” Dean says, more gently this time. He offers him a drink of diet soda, which he takes begrudgingly. “I gotta be able to support our asses.” Bobby offers little more than a grunt in reply. Dean will take it, for now. He finishes feeding him in silence, then takes him to use the commode in the same silence, his thoughts absorbed in what to do next.

Dean hates leaving Bobby alone, but he knows he can’t really get into trouble. He can’t move his wheelchair on his own, having lost that ability a while ago, so he can’t fall. He has a cup with a long straw on one side for water, so he won’t dehydrate, and another straw on the opposite side that, when he blows into it, calls for emergency services should something arise. It’s the best they can do. Dean checks the straws to make sure Bobby can reach them within the limited range of motion of his head, then clicks on the TV. “What channel do you want?”

“CNN’s alright for now, I guess,” he grumbles.

“Kay,” he says, thumbing the buttons of the remote control. “There you go. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Yes, alright.

Back at the garage, Dean tries to focus on work and leave the Bobby stuff for home, but he finds his mind wandering, trying to figure out how he’s going to make sure Bobby’s personal care is covered while still having enough time to work on the Camaro project and help his guys since they’re short-handed because of Rufus’ medical leave. He already works seven days a week. He wishes he could add another day to the week, though he’d still have to find help for Bobby for that eighth day, so fuck it. He drops the work stuff and clicks into the ad he usually uses to recruit the new aides, saved in his notes app because he’s used it so often lately. He cuts and pastes it into his various social media and online options, then sits back. He’s not hopeful. Ugh, this requires coffee. He forgoes the cheap coffee in the breakroom for the good stuff at The Bee’s Knees, the coffee shop across the street. Ever-present, ever-cheerful owner Charlie greets him.

“Heya, Deanie Beanie!” she grins. Despite the cutesy nickname, he can’t help but smile back.


“Uh oh,” she teases. “What’s going on?”

“Life,” he gripes. She pouts but nods and makes his drink herself, letting her part-time helper Kevin help the next person in line. Dean sits at a small table near a wall to wait, purposely not taking the window seat where he’d see Singer’s Garage emblazoned on the sign across the street. He’s trying
to make the garage work, to keep Bobby’s baby alive and well, but it’s hard when he has so many things pulling at him. He’s keeping afloat financially so far. Mentally and physically, well, that’s another thing.

“What’s got you stressed out?” Charlie asks as she delivers his coffee. He frowns at the ceramic cup with the flowers and bees encircling it.

“I wanted this to go, like usual,” he says.


He doesn’t know Charlie all that well, but she’s always pleasant and nice and he finds himself spilling to her. “My Uncle Bobby needs home health care and I can’t seem to keep a worker there. He scares them all off. I just lost another one today and now I have to do interviews all over again. I’m trying to keep things running over there”—he waves a hand toward Singer’s—“and he isn’t helping matters by pulling this shit.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Charlie comments, “He’s a tough one, huh? Having a hard time accepting help?”

“Yeah.” Dean sips his coffee and whoa, sugar rush. “I’m trying to keep him out of a damn nursing home but he doesn’t seem to get it.”

“My mom got care at home for a long time, until she died a few months ago. She was as stubborn as they come.” She smiles. “We had someone really great for her last couple of years. Mind if I talk to him?”

“Him? Uh, I dunno. I don’t think he’ll want a guy wiping his ass. He has a hard enough time letting me do it.”

“Has he told you he doesn’t want a male aide?”

Dean thinks. He really doesn’t give Bobby input into the process because if he did, he’d pick no one. “No, not specifically.”

“Then no harm in trying. He’s awesome. Not what you’d expect. Your uncle might like him. Was he in the military?”

“Yeah.”

“Cas was, too. Might find some common ground.”

He rolls that around in his mind. Worth a shot. “Sure, lemme know. You know where to find me.”

“Will do!” She Vulcan-salutes him as she stands. “You’re not allowed to leave until that drink is finished. Sit. Relax. It’s hard to be a caregiver. I remember.” She writes down a phone number on a piece of paper from her apron. “My cell. Call or text me anytime.” She pats his shoulder and walks back to the counter to help Kevin. Dean sits back. It’s nice to have someone who understands, someone who makes him take care of himself. He sips his coffee slowly and breathes.

A few hectic days later, Charlie graces his waiting room first thing with coffee, which he accepts greedily with grabby hands and a five dollar bill he pulls hastily out of his pocket. “Hey, you still looking for someone?” she asks, waving his money away.

“Got some interviews set up for today,” Dean informs her. “Not holdin’ out much hope, honestly.”
“Do you have a free slot? Cas is willing to talk to you.”

Dean checks the calendar on his phone. “I got 3:30. I’m not gonna fill it so if he wants it, just have him show up.”

“You got it! I’ll let him know. BEEE happy!” she calls cheerfully. He waves at her, then notices the handwriting on his paper cup: Bee happy, with a little drawing of a bee. Cute.

The day flies by in a blur of oil changes and state inspections, ordering parts for the Camaro, running to and from home to help Bobby, and interview after hopeless interview. He’s almost thrilled when he’s no-showed for the 3:00 interview. He takes a quick breather to piss and to scarf down a sad peanut butter sandwich he was supposed to eat earlier but didn’t bother to. The gummy filling and pasty bread stick to the roof of his mouth one too many times and tick him off. He needs water.

Coming out of his office to raid the vending machine, he stops when he notices a customer sitting in the waiting area, decked out in a dark blue suit and tie and looking serious (and seriously hot). He’s tanned, his hands are manicured, he fills out the suit nicely—even strains it in the arms a little—and he exudes calm and confidence. Fuck. His type comes around to the garage every so often, but they aren’t usually quite as hot as this one. Dean, though he hasn’t seen any action in forever and doesn’t really have time for it, turns on the charm. “Hey there, welcome to Singer’s. How can I help you?” he asks in a low, suggestive voice, pairing it with a sexy smirk.

The man turns his way and holy shit, those eyes. “Hello. I have a 3:30 appointment.” Oh, and that voice.

“Alright,” he says, staying cool as he holds the man’s expectant, scrutinizing gaze in his own. He opens the appointment calendar on the computer. “You wanna tell me your name?” And give me your number, and hook up with me in my office?

“Cas Novak.”

Dean’s eyes widen and he clears his throat. Shit. “Uh, Cas. Charlie’s friend? Here for the interview? That Cas?” he asks, no longer turning on the charm and focusing instead on recovering from his horrible fumble.

“Yes to all of your questions,” he nods.

“Oh. Okay, ah, sorry, the suit threw me off. No one wears a suit for a home health aide interview, man,” he comments. He’s trying to make a joke, but it falls flat.

“My mother taught me to make a good impression.” He stands. He’s tall. Dean likes that in a man. “I am concluding based on our interaction that you are Mr. Winchester. Pleased to meet you.” He holds out his hand.

“Uh, Dean, yeah, that’s me,” he confirms reluctantly, taking his hand. He’s strong, too. Damn. Brick house stud, this one. Cas pulls back and surreptitiously wipes peanut butter off his hand with a tissue from the reception desk. Great.

“I’m early, so please do not feel pressure to see me now. I’ll wait.”

“Naw, come on in. I was just finishing lunch.” Obviously, he thinks to himself. Dean yells for Garth to cover the phones for him, then leads Cas to the office directly behind him. The man sits precisely, relaxed but controlled all at once. “Uh, so do you have any experience? I mean you do, ‘cause Charlie said you did. Uh, so, tell me about it, I guess?”

Cas tilts his head slightly and squints at Dean. “Isn’t your uncle joining us?”
Huh. Right. “Uh, no, I handle all the interviews.”

“I see,” he frowns. “Well, I’m an RN and I have provided nursing services to individuals for many years, both in and out of the military. You’ll see all of that information in the résumé I emailed you.”

Dean turns and pulls up his email (which he hasn’t checked all day) and yup, there it is. He opens it and scans the résumé—got his RN, then enlisted in the Army, became a Major, worked at Walter Reed, eventually discharged and worked in a civilian hospital here for a while, then at a hospice, and finally for Charlie’s mom, Gertrude. He looks at Cas and says, “Gotta tell you, I think you’re overqualified.”

“Perhaps. However, I don’t know your uncle. Does he require nursing facility level of care?”

“Uh, yeah. He has multiple sclerosis. He can’t move anything past his neck anymore, so he’s in a wheelchair and needs everything done for him, pretty much. But with Bobby I’m really looking mostly for simple personal care stuff—feeding and toileting. I bathe and dress him before I go to work and I prep his lunch so his worker doesn’t have to do it. He takes meds but I take care of those. He has exercises to try to keep his muscles loose but I do those, too. I mean I do the other stuff too, obviously, so…I guess I just mean that he needs someone to help him with getting his lunch, that kinda thing. I do all the rest. I just gotta be able to work during the day, you know?”

“I see. Well, to address your concern, I delivered similar services to Trudy—all ADLs, range of motion exercises, socialization, and so on, as well as more advanced nursing care. I know you may fear that I will grow bored and leave quickly, or that the pay may not be substantial enough, but I assure you that there are certain intangibles I search for in my work and I know fairly quickly whether they exist or not. I will certainly be able to tell you after I meet your uncle, if indeed we agree to continue to the next stage of the interview process.” Next stage? What does this guy think this is, for crying out loud? “As for compensation, I am aware of the pay scale that is typical of the work.”

“Oookay,” Dean says. He’s not sure what else to say. “Uh, well, my uncle is a crotchety old guy. I guess you should know that. Most of our workers have quit within a few weeks.”

“I imagine if I were in a position in which I required that level of assistance, I might be crotchety, also.”

Dean tries to avoid thinking about how the disease affects his uncle. It makes him squirmy. “Yeah, well, he’s always been crotchety.”

“Ah. Well, whether his attitude is disease-driven or personality-driven, a sour temperament is not a deterrent for me.” He folds his hands in his lap.

God, does this guy always talk like a thesaurus? He’s not sure if Bobby will go for this dude—Bobby’s more of the “shoot the shit over a burger” kind of guy—but it’s not like he has tons of other options. “Uh, well, okay. Um… well, you’re way more qualified than anyone else I’ve seen, so if you wanna try it, I can tell you the pay and whatnot.”

“You don’t want me to meet your uncle? Doesn’t your uncle have the final say in terms of who works for him?”

“Um, no? I haven’t really had time to do that, and honestly I’m afraid he wouldn’t pick anyone, so I just hire ‘em and bring ‘em home.”

Cas pauses in thought, seeming to have something to say but restraining himself. “I see. If I may be
frank, Mr. Winchester, I believe that may be contributing to why a worker hasn’t stayed. Your uncle, I posit, feels very little control in his life because of this disease. If you allowed him some input, he may be more responsive.”

Dean’s not sure he’s crazy about this guy’s (probably completely right) theory and his stiff, English-professor-meets-medical-professional-meets-android way of delivering it. Who is this Mr. Roboto you sent me? he texts Charlie. Dean knows his reaction to the guy mostly stems from his own guilt, but he freely projects that onto Cas. “Oh, are you a psychologist, too?” he asks, unnecessarily harshly.

“No,” Cas responds unflappably (which just pisses Dean off), “though I did work with many people with PTSD, depression, and anxiety. It wasn’t uncommon in the hospitals.”

Dean rolls his head, stretching the muscles in his neck. He’s torn. On the one hand, the guy is super smart and knows his shit. On the other hand, he seems like a know-it-all and that won’t fly. On the other hand, he managed to stay with Charlie’s mom for however long and he must’ve gotten along with her, and Charlie said he’s awesome, whatever that means to her. On the other hand, Bobby isn’t gonna want a dude helping him. On the other hand, the guy’s super hot and Dean deserves some eye candy. On the other hand, he’s kind of pissing him off. On the other…how many hands is that? Maybe he should start using fingers…

“And isn’t it difficult to assess someone’s skills if you don’t observe them first?” his interviewee asks, glossing over Dean’s grouchy attitude to return to the topic of the job he’s interviewing for. Apparently, “sour temperaments” really aren’t a “deterrent” for this guy.

“Uh, well, I never thought about it. They told me they could do it and I believed them.” He raises a good point, Dean thinks begrudgingly.

“It would also make sense for me to meet him to see if I want to work for him before agreeing to work for him. He would be my employer.”

“Well, it’d be both of us,” Dean corrects him.

“Is your uncle cognitively incapacitated?” Dean stares at him blankly, not quite sure what he means. Cas clarifies, “His thinking. Is he able to make decisions? Is he his own guardian?”

Oh. “Uh, yeah, he can think, make his own decisions. He’s his own guardian.”

“I see. So I suppose we have a different understanding as to who my employer would be. That would need to be clarified for me in a second interview with your uncle, the person receiving the care.”

Cas really knows how to push his own agenda. He isn’t really getting what Dean’s trying to say, and he’s starting to think that Cas thinks he’s a jerk to Bobby. Maybe this guy isn’t such a good idea, despite his qualifications and other…assets. “Listen, man, I’m not being a dick to my uncle or anything, okay? I’m just saying—”

“Hey Cas! Hey Dean!” Charlie calls, poking her head into Dean’s office. “Just figured I’d come by to make sure you guys met and were hitting it off!”

Dean wipes a hand over his face. He didn’t mean for her to stop by. He was just bitching. Cas looks mortified. “Cas… he starts, but she jumps right in.

“Cas, did you tell him how you and my mom would visit the animal shelter every week and how you used to hold the animals on her lap and take her hand so she could feel them?”
“No, Charlie, I—”

“Did you tell him about how you would tell dirty jokes and make Mom laugh until she pissed herself? I mean, not that it was hard to do or anything...”

“Charlie,” he scolds, but he’s smiling. Smiling Cas is much friendlier, not so douchey. He can’t help but smile, too, watching their interaction.

“No, no, tell him about the time you guys dressed up for Halloween!”

“No, I’m not telling him about that,” he chuckles.

“Solstice Shitstorm?” She starts to laugh and throws her hands out, miming an explosion.

“We are not discussing that,” he laughs. “Get out of here. How can I be professional when you’re here interrupting?”

“Professional you has a stick up his ass,” she whines. “Just be YOU you.” She drops two cups onto the desk and musses his hair. “See you at home. Don’t be boring! Ooh, tell him the cunnilingus joke! Mom loved that one!” Like a tornado, she leaves as quickly as she arrived. Cas turns to Dean, red-faced but with a smile still hovering on his face. Dean likes it.

“I apologize,” Cas says, his serious expression turned sheepish.

“It’s alright,” Dean smirks. “You guys live together?”

“Yes. Not at first, but eventually, when Trudy’s illness progressed. It was easier on both of them to have me around 24/7 then, and I didn’t mind. After her mother’s death, we just... stayed together.” He drops his gaze to his lap. “Charlie is very special to me.”

“I can tell.” Cas raises his head and the men smile at each other softly. *Maybe this guy isn’t so bad.* Dean clears his throat. “So, I’ll talk with Bobby.”

“Alright,” Cas says. They stand and shake hands. “Thank you for the interview.”

“Sure thing, Cas.” He walks him to the door. “I’d love to hear that joke, by the way,” he grins.

“Perhaps another time,” Cas says seriously but with a subtle twinkle in his eyes. Dean watches him leave, slide into a dilapidated Lincoln, and drive away.

“What was that all about?” Garth asks with a little smile, his eyes darting between his employer and the man who just left.

Dean shakes his head and drinks his coffee, waiting for the four o’clock interview he has scheduled but probably won’t need.
“What the hell did you get me into?” Castiel Novak grumbles at his friend, Charlie. “And don’t think
tacos are going to win me over.”

“Well, they are,” she says smugly.

“They aren’t,” he insists before taking a large, crunchy bite. “You’re not forgiven,” he mutters with
his mouth full.

“Yes, I am,” she says. Of course she is. He can’t stay mad at her and she damn well knows it. “You
got a second interview, right?”

“He texted me and offered one tomorrow,” he confirms, “but I haven’t answered him yet. I’m not
sure I want one. Are you friends with this Dean guy? Can you tell me anything about him? Because
my initial impression was not all that favorable.”

“What do you mean, ‘not all that favorable’?”

“He thought I was a customer and flirted with me, then ridiculed my decision to wear a suit to an
interview. He picks his uncle’s home care providers like one night stands and he doesn’t seem to
give his uncle a lot of say in his own health care decisions. He didn’t even want to have his uncle
meet me first, and when I brought up my concern about that he was defensive and sarcastic.”

She scrunches her nose. “Oh. Well, no, I don’t know him that well. He’s a customer. I can say,
though, that he’s in a lot, and I see that car of his at the shop every day—like, every day. He’s always
been super nice, but he’s looked a lot more tired lately. He told me that they’ve lost a lot of aides. I
sort of get the feeling he’s doing this all by himself, Cas. I think they could really use a guy like
you.” She pouts at him and gives him doe eyes.

“Don’t try to make me feel bad,” he chides.

“Remember how burnt out I was?” she continues softly, taking his hand. “Remember how I was
trying to keep up the shop and take care of my mom, and how I could barely keep my head above
water? Remember how grumpy I was all the time, not myself?”

“Charlie,” he warns, taking his hand back and folding his arms. He attempts to be stern, but the damn
smile sneaks onto his face anyway.

“Caaaas,” she pleads, though he knows that she knows she’s already won. “You know he’s
probably just at his wit’s end. Was the whole interview bad?”

“Not the whole interview,” Cas admits. “At the end things were friendlier and more relaxed, and he
was going to talk to his uncle, which he apparently did before offering me the second interview. So
that’s good, I guess.”

“See? Friendlier, more relaxed, listened and took your advice… you guys just don’t know each
other. Give him a chance, see what happens. I have a really good feeling about this.”

“Alright, alright.” He texts Dean and agrees to meet them at 6:00 the next evening. “Happy?”
“Very,” she smiles. She leans forward onto her elbows. “So, he was flirting with you, huh? He’s cute, isn’t he?”

Cas’ eyes widen. “Oh my fucking… did you set this up because you wanted to set me up?” She laughs hysterically, snorting and clutching her stomach. He leans forward and points an accusing finger. “You dick!”

Calling her a dick just makes her laugh harder. “That wasn’t much of an insult, Cas! You like dick!”

“Answer the question, Bradbury,” he demands, pursing his lips in reluctant amusement.

She holds her hand in the air as if making a pledge. “No, I swear I didn’t try to set you up with the job because he’s cute,” she giggles, then side-eyes him mischievously. “I’m just saying it’s a bonus.”

“Stop it!” he laughs, tossing lettuce at her. “I wouldn’t be able to date him anyway, so if that was your goal, it backfired.”

“I notice you avoided my question,” she sing-songs.

“He’s not cute,” Cas answers.

“Mmm, no, you’re right. He’s hot. Right? Right?” she goads, tickling under his chin.

“I am not dignifying that with a response,” he says, squirming under her fingers.

The next day, Cas considers the suit again, then jeans and a t-shirt for the casual look Dean probably expected when they met. Neither seems right, so he goes with casual dress pants and a white button-down with the sleeves rolled, collar open. He frowns. He looks like he’s going on a date.

Like you’ve had one of those lately. How many years has it been?

He buttons an extra button toward the top. There. He slips on a pair of dressy ankle boots, smooths his hair down, and grabs his keys. He hopes Charlie’s “good feeling” is correct. He’d like to get back into private duty nursing. Not that he minds helping Charlie at the bakery or floating at the local hospice, but he’s not much of a baker and he’s jaded by the U.S. healthcare system overall, which is why he got out of working in hospitals in the first place. Hospice, at least, is a gentler system, but it’s still governed by policies that don’t always benefit the patient.

The GPS takes him to a moderately-sized home that needs a little fixing up. It’s situated in a small neighborhood on a dead-end street where the dead end is abutted by overgrown fields. The house itself has enough of a yard to have a small buffer from the neighbors and what looks like a wooded area behind it. There are stairs on the side of the house and a ramp in the front. The ramp is too steep, certainly not the appropriate grade to make it safe for either the person in the wheelchair or the person maneuvering it. There’s a black car—an old Impala, he thinks—in the driveway, no indication of any wheelchair-accessible vehicle around. There’s no debris in the yard, but it does look like the grass hasn’t been cut in a couple of weeks. Hmm. Perhaps Charlie is right about Dean doing this all alone.

Cas climbs the stairs to the side door and knocks. Hearing two loud, muffled male voices, he wonders if they are discussing his arrival. He’s fairly certain that Bobby Singer, his potential client, is not happy about any of this. Dean opens the door, clad in jeans and a worn t-shirt. His shirt is slightly damp at the belly, as if he was working at the sink and water splashed up. Charlie’s teasing about him being hot pops into his brain, which agrees with her despite his protestations. With golden green eyes, a perfectly symmetrical face, and miles of muscle, how could he not agree? He pushes the thought aside. “Hey, Cas,” Dean says, looking as worn as his t-shirt. “No suit this time, eh?” Dean’s small grin tells him the man is teasing him gently rather than ridiculing him.
“My mother also taught me to dress appropriately for the situation,” he smiles quietly, an acknowledgment that he may have overdressed yesterday. Dean chuckles and invites him in. He glances around at the space, the floors cleared of obstacles and the bookshelves full of books that likely haven’t been touched by either occupant for a while. His eyes stop at a seated man, and he gets his first look at the person he assumes is Bobby.

Bobby is an older Caucasian man, probably mid to late sixties, of average height and build. He appears alert and oriented. His legs are covered so he can’t assess those, but his arms are bare and exhibit low muscle tone, at least from a distance. His fingers are curled, as is common for a person with MS. He has quadriplegia according to Dean, and this appears evident upon observation, as Bobby makes no move with his limbs to greet Cas (or kick him out). He does appear to have some range of motion in his neck and head, which allows him to sip on the straws on either side of his chair. As he suspected, the man doesn’t look very happy to see him.

“Mr. Singer, sir, I’m Castiel Novak.” He nods and doesn’t move to shake his hand, not knowing how the man would feel about his hand being picked up by a stranger. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for seeing me.”

“Whatever. It was all Dean’s bright idea,” Bobby grumbles. Ah. Sarcasm and a general disdain for anyone or anything. Interesting.

“I appreciate it all the more, then. May I sit?”

“Knock yourself out.”

Cas hides a small smirk and lowers himself onto a couch that’s seen better days. The seat cushion on the end bows. He sits there on purpose. They stare at each other for a minute.

“Well? Have you had your fill of lookin’ at me like a zoo exhibit? Why are you here?” Bobby gruffs.

“So you can interview me, sir,” Cas says calmly, unruffled by his attitude. “I’m willing to answer any questions you have or to demonstrate any skills you’d like to see.”

The man squints. Cas sits at attention, waiting. “I don’t got no questions,” he says finally. “Don’t even know why we’re doin’ this.”

Nodding, Cas says, “My understanding is that your nephew is looking for someone to assist you with your activities of daily living while he’s at work. Is that your understanding?”

“Yup.” He turns his head and takes a sip of water.

“And what are you looking for?”

“Nothin’. I told him I don’t need any of it.”

“I see. So why have anyone come, then?”

“Because he does need it,” Dean interjects, shooting a pointed look at his uncle.

Cas turns to the man with the tired green eyes. “With all due respect, Mr. Winchester, I was asking him.” He sees Bobby’s brows lift ever-so-slightly in his periphery.

“Well, with all due respect, Mr. ... Cas,” Dean scowls, probably pissed at himself for forgetting his last name and ruining his comeback. Cas resolutely keeps a blank face because he knows the man is frustrated with his uncle. “He’d rather sit there in his shit and starve, either that or let me come home
in the middle of every damn day to take care of things. Neither of those are gonna work.”

“I told you you don’t have to come home. I can wait.”

“No, you can’t. It’s not healthy, Bobby.”

Before their argument can get too far, Cas interrupts them. “So, sir, if left to your decision, you would have your nephew stay at work and you would choose to go without food from the time he leaves for work until the time he returns home, which is approximately nine hours or so, is that right?” He purposely doesn’t mention toileting.

“Yup.”

“But that worries him.”

“Apparently. Not like I’ve never skipped lunch before.”

“Right. Probably did all the time at the garage.” He assumed by the name that the garage where Dean works used to be Bobby’s.

“Damn straight. Worked my ass off right through lunch. I’m not some sorta delicate flower.”

“I heard you were in the military, too. Skipped a lot of lunch then, I’d guess. I know I did.”

“Damn right.”

“I’ve gotten soft since then. I have to eat my 3 squares, at least,” he jokes. Take a one-down stance to offset any perceived power differential. “So the other workers haven’t worked out for that reason? Because they wouldn’t let you decide whether you wanted to eat or not?”

“Bout right. Wouldn’t let me decide anything. That and when I did give ‘em a chance, they were clueless or they pissed me off, and none of ‘em could take constructive criticism.”

Cas nods and thinks about what direction to take. He sits back into the couch. “That’s the problem with people today. A lot of people I worked with at the hospitals didn’t want to hear constructive criticism. Everyone thought they knew best even though they couldn’t see the forest for the trees, and most of them wanted things their way or no way and weren’t willing to listen to common sense. And then you had the ones in charge, who also wanted their way and didn’t see common sense, either, and it became a pissing contest. If they’d stopped arguing for one g-d minute and taken a look at the situation, they would’ve seen that the circumstances were dictating what needed to be done most of the time, and it didn’t matter whether they or their egos liked it that way or not. Common sense keeps a lot of situations from going full-on FUBAR, as long as people open their eyes to it. That and some effort to understand each other.”

Bobby grunts. Dean watches warily. Cas hopes his blunt metaphor got his point across. “Speaking of people wanting to do things their way, your nephew clearly has an agenda.” Dean’s eyes and nostrils flare with anger. He ignores it, knowing that if his strategy works, the man will be grateful later. Plus he likes poking at him a little. “I don’t know how you feel about it, sir, but to me, it would be a compromise if someone—me or someone else you choose—came and hung around at lunchtime.

You help your nephew out by making him feel better that someone’s checking in on you and offering you care. That way, he can focus on the garage and maybe not spend every day there. Meanwhile, if you have someone here—again, me or whoever—you can choose to tell the worker to go to hell or to make you a sandwich, whatever. It’s up to you.” He pauses to let that sink in, then finishes, “Now I don’t know about the other people you’ve had, but I’m not a clueless newbie. I’m extremely skilled and have a lot of years of experience. I know how to take direction and I know
how to take constructive criticism, and as far as I’m concerned, you’re in charge of you.” *Inspire confidence but give him the power to choose.* “So, do you have any questions for me?”

Bobby eyes him speculatively, and Dean still looks miffed. Cas waits, neither shrinking from nor challenging Bobby’s gaze and not even acknowledging Dean’s.

“We’ll see how long you last,” Bobby says finally.

“Sir, are you offering me the position?”

Cas gets a death glare from Bobby and has to hold back a victorious grin. This is one of the intangibles he looks for—a challenge. He loves helping to breathe life into people again, stoking the fire of resistance and rebellion.

“We’ll try it out. I’ll give ya a week.”

“But you gotta let him do stuff, Bobby. He can’t just sit here and do nothing. You need stuff done for you. You gotta let him feed you and change your diaper—”

“I’ll decide that, son,” he says to Dean.

“You can’t just sit in your piss and not eat, Bobby! Cas, at least feed him and make sure he doesn’t have bed sores or something.”

“I can sit in my piss all I want!” Bobby yells at Dean, then says to Cas, “You can come over tomorrow.”

“Sir, I haven’t given you my answer.” *Show him you’re not a pushover.*

Cas thinks that if Bobby could kick his ass right now, he would. Dean probably would too, for different reasons. “Fine. You want it? Can you make it here tomorrow?”

Making a show of checking his phone, he nods. “I’m working first thing in the morning, so I can be here by 11:30. Does that work for you, sir?”

“Works fine. Don’t expect to be doin’ anything. Bring a book or somethin’.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bobby grunts again and tells Dean to do the “paperwork shit” that he has to do. Dean huffs and sits next to Cas, presenting him a folder with the relevant information. “You need to just do stuff for him. He won’t let you if you give him the choice,” Dean murmurs only for him to hear.

“He’s my employer, Mr. Winchester.”

“I’m your employer, too,” he growls. “He may be his own guardian, but I’m his power of attorney and if he’s not making good decisions, I gotta right to challenge that.”

Cas isn’t sure that’s exactly how it works, but he doesn’t think the conflict will last long enough to matter that much. “If I indeed have two employers, then those employers need to figure out my job duties amongst themselves and let me know what they are once they’re in agreement.” He tucks the paperwork under his arm to complete at home rather than completing it there, as Dean likely expected. “I’ll see you tomorrow at 11:30, Mr. Singer.” He walks out of the house without looking back, certain that he’s made an impression.

Charlie practically pounces on him when he enters the house. “So, how’d it go?”
“Well, I think I’ve ruined the fragile goodwill between Dean and I. He was very displeased with how I challenged him and the situation. As far as Bobby, he’s an ornery man who doesn’t want me there and who’s going to test me in every way he can think of. He gave me a week.”

“So, just the way you planned it, then,” she grins.

“Just the way I planned it,” he agrees.

“And just the way you like it.”

He winks at her. “Yes. Just the way I like it.”

Chapter End Notes

Charlie and Cas are friendship goals. :D And hmmm...will Bobby and Cas get along? Find out next time.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Hope you’re having a lovely week so far! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cas spends the first part of his day at The Bee’s Knees kneading dough, chopping fruit, and moving heavy flour bags. Charlie jokes that she likes his “strong hands” and doesn’t want to give them up, but he also knows that she wants him to follow his passion—and that passion is caring for people.

It’s a passion that springs from deep within, something that just exists in him. It’s certainly not a passion others might’ve expected of him, given his upbringing. His mother, while he knew she cared as much as she could, was not particularly nurturing. She might’ve bandaged his knee or made his lunch once in a while, and she said ‘I love you’ from time to time, but all the little things that make a mother feel like Mom…they were lacking. Later in Marjorie Novak’s too-short life, the exacerbation of her illness put him into the position of caregiver, an emotionally taxing role that nearly broke him. His so-called father was gone a lot, a career military man. By the time Elliot Novak retired and was home again, his mother was dead and Cas was grown and no longer influenced by him. He supposes that could be argued since he also ended up in the military after college, but for Cas it was less about being in the military and more about helping the people he knew needed some of the most intensive help in an environment in which he was familiar. If you grow up in a military family, you get to know the ins and outs of the system. It helped his adjustment (and it helped him manipulate the system to his patients’ advantage when necessary).

The military has lots of ornery men, so he knows he’ll be quite comfortable with Bobby. The crankiest were usually reserved for him whenever possible. He had a way with them—just enough intelligence, skill, and intolerance of bullshit to garner their confidence, and just enough humility and humor to show them they were not in a one-down position with him. That was important. Nothing knocks you down a peg or two like being unable to meet your own basic needs, and for soldiers, it was a hard reality to accept. They mostly ended up treated like children then, and what do children feel when told they can’t do something? Petulant and rebellious. Most don’t act on their rebellious feelings, but the urge is there. Caregivers try to squelch that rebellion because it’s easier for them, but in Cas’ view, that rebellion is part of what helps them come to terms with their situations and thrive despite them. He likes to see people fight for their lives rather than giving up on them.

Wearing jeans and a plain red t-shirt with a black zip-up sweatshirt, Cas makes the trek to Bobby Singer’s house. Along the way, he thinks about Dean. He seems to do it all and he’s clearly burnt out. Hopefully, if this works out, both of them will allow him to do more than just lunchtime care for Bobby, and Dean can have a break. Caregiving is a tough job, and often quite unrecognized as such. Just because you love someone, and just because you want to help them and you want to keep them at home, doesn’t mean you don’t feel resentful sometimes and doesn’t mean that you don’t have times when you’d rather chuck it all and move to a tropical island or something. Most caregivers feel a lot of guilt about that. Cas hopes to take some of that away. He sees his job as caring for the caregiver as well as the client.

He arrives and knocks on the door. Hearing no response, he knocks again. It takes four times before Bobby yells for him to come in. He raises a surly brow as Cas enters.
“You coulda just walked in. Not like I can get to the door or nothin’.”

“We hadn’t discussed that in advance. I don’t just walk into people’s homes unless it’s been discussed and agreed to previously.”

“Well, ain’t you considerate.”

Cas shrugs. “I try to be. Should I just walk in tomorrow?”

“Yeah, fine. I ain’t gonna waste my voice on ya.” Cas nods and places his things by an armchair.

“Where’s your getup?” he asks as Cas sits.

“My getup?”

“My nursin’ outfit.”

“My scrubs or my Naughty Nurse costume with the fishnets?” Cas asks, deadpan. Bobby’s eyebrow rises. It’s as amused as he’s seen the man so far. He can take a joke. Good.

Cas smirks and answers him, “I don’t wear scrubs unless you want me to or one of us is ill. Would you prefer I wear them as part of my employment?”

“Naw, not necessary.”

“Okay. So, is there anything I can do for you, sir?”

Bobby’s eyes harden, challenging. “Nope.”

Alright. Please inform me if you want or need anything.” He opens his bag and pulls out his iPad to listen to his latest read, *Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage*. He loves survivor stories; he relates to the desperation and determination. He leaves one earbud out so that he can hear Bobby if he needs anything and so that he can make the man curious. About a half hour in, he answers a text from Dean—he’s doing fine, no need to come home to check on him, that defeats the purpose—then asks if Bobby wants anything for lunch or in general. At his refusal, Cas nods and pulls out his lunch to nibble on while he listens. It’s a cold BLT. The toast is soggy, but the bacon makes it all better. His sandwich is paired with crunchy tortilla chips that are meant to get the man’s attention and one of Charlie’s cinnamon rolls from this morning, also meant to get his attention. He eats them all right in front of Bobby, sucking icing off his fingers noisily at the end, then gets up to wash his hands. He cleans up the trash from lunch and settles back in with his story, a bit distracted from his listening by the TV blaring the local news after *The Price Is Right*. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices Bobby glancing at him sometimes. When his two hours are up, he stands.

‘You headin’ out?’

“Yes. My time is done. Anything you want before I go?”

“Nope.”

“What would you like me to do with the lunch Dean prepared?”

Bobby squints at him before saying, “Toss it.”

“Alright, then.” He pulls the food from the fridge and throws it away (though it pains him to do so), then returns to the living room and Bobby’s inscrutable face. “See you tomorrow,” Cas says with a raised hand. He eyeballs him unobtrusively to make sure his straws are in place and he has enough water, then heads out the door without a backwards glance.
It goes like this for two more days. On the second day of his employment he brings pizza and apple pie, both of which he microwaves to increase their scent. On the third day he brings leftover pad Thai (also very fragrant) and orange creamsicle cupcakes, two of which he leaves in a box on Bobby’s coffee table “for whenever you want them.” On the fourth day, Bobby breaks.

“I rushed out the door without lunch this morning,” Cas explains a half-hour into his shift. “I’m going to run out to grab a cheesesteak.” He knows, because he asked Dean, that this is one of Bobby’s favorite things to eat. “I’ll tag on the few minutes I’m gone to the end of my shift, if it’s alright with you. You want anything while I’m out?”

Bobby rolls his lips into a frown, then grumbles, “Yeah, gimme one of those, too, I guess.”

“What?”

“Gimme a large one. Extra onions and peppers. Extra cheese, too. Provolone. Don’t let ‘em skimp on the cheese. And a Dr. Pepper, large. Diet, I guess. Gotta watch the sugar.”

He jots down Bobby’s order. “Got it.”

“Money’s in the jar over there.” Bobby nudges his head toward one of the bookshelves. A cookie jar shaped like the four main characters in *The Wizard of Oz* sits on the lowest shelf. His eyes widen when he reaches in and sees an abundance of loose cash and a debit card with Bobby’s name on it. That doesn’t seem particularly safe, but he refrains from commenting for now. He grabs a twenty dollar bill and replaces the cover, showing Bobby what he took. When he returns a short time later, he returns the change to the jar and leaves the receipt for Bobby’s meal on the table, then pulls up a TV tray and sets their food down on it.

“Are you eating this now or is this for later?” Cas asks.

“Now’s alright.”

“Alright.” Cas washes his hands, unwraps Bobby’s sandwich and offers him a bite. He peels the wrapper off his own while Bobby’s chewing and frowns. “Should’ve asked for extra cheese, like you did,” he mutters aloud on purpose.

“Told you. Next time you’ll know,” Bobby says.

“Guess so,” he comments, keeping his smile to himself. He offers him another bite, followed by a sip of his soda. They eat mostly in silence, but to Cas, Bobby’s actions speak loud and clear.

After lunch, Bobby sits and watches TV again. Cas goes back to his audiobook, one earbud out.

“You readin’ anything good?”

Cas looks at his employer. “Very good, yes.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s a story about a man and his crew who tried to explore Antarctica back in the early 1900s. Their ship got wrecked and they had to escape and try to make it to safety.”

Bobby nods. “Sounds good.”

“It is. Do you want to listen?”

“Nah. I’d have to hear it from the beginning.”
“True,” Cas muses. He listens a little longer, making a few sounds and faces to show his intense interest in the story. His shift almost over, he stands and removes his earbud, then lays his iPad on the chair behind him. “Do you need to use the bathroom or need a change in position?”

Bobby’s hackles raise. “No, I don’t want you doin’ that shit.”

Cas is a bit concerned about his health, but he’s not going to push it just yet, knowing that the man has likely sat for hours before and that his undergarments are probably absorbent enough. He will, however, plant the seed. “Alright, that’s fine. I’m sure you know, but I do have a responsibility to mention to you that your skin will break down and you risk painful pressure ulcers if you expose your skin to too much moisture or not enough movement for long periods of time. Eventually you risk infection and perhaps a hospital stay.” He stretches. “My time is up. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, alright.”

Cas picks up his jacket and keys, purposely “forgetting” his iPad on the chair. He doesn’t think Bobby will actually ask Dean to play the audiobook for him, but he wants to tempt him, at least.

That night, he receives a text from Dean:

From Dean 5:35pm: You forgot your iPad here

From Cas 5:36pm: That’s okay. I’ll grab it tomorrow.

From Cas 5:36pm: Your uncle was interested in a book I was listening to. Feel free to open it and check it out. It’s in the Audible app.

Planting seeds, Cas thinks.

At 11:30 the next day, Bobby greets him with, “Dean went nosin’ through your tablet thingie and we listened to the first chapter. Said you gave ’im permission.”

“I did,” Cas says casually, removing his wet coat and shoes. It’s a dark, dismal day outside, but the Singer/Winchester home is lit softly with incandescent bulbs and the glow of the television. “What did you think?”

“Was good,” Bobby grunts. “Dean said he’s gonna download it onto his tablet. Might listen to it this weekend.”

“Glad you both enjoyed it. I find audiobooks a refreshing change from TV sometimes. Are you having lunch today?”

“I guess so.”

“Alright. What do you want?”

“Dean set up the casserole leftovers for me.”

“Is that what you want?”

Bobby flicks his eyes up at him. “Yeah, he makes pretty good tuna casserole.”

“Alright. Do you want to eat now or wait?”

“Now’s fine.”
“Alright.” Cas heats up the casserole, then they eat their lunches and watch TV. As they finish, Cas asks if Bobby needs or wants anything else. He’s fairly certain that his incontinence undergarments are wet, but Bobby says nothing about it and refuses further assistance. Cas picks up the dishes Bobby used, then brings them to the kitchen and starts to load the dishwasher.

“You don’t gotta do that,” Bobby calls from the living room.

“I’ll stop if you want me to,” he says. “I just figured it would help Dean out a bit.” Bobby doesn’t say anything after that, so he continues loading. “And speaking of that, I’m more than capable of getting your lunch together if it’s alright with both of you. I hate to think that Dean does it simply for my convenience.” Bobby, again, says nothing. It doesn’t bother Cas. Some people need time to adjust to new ideas.

At the end of his shift, Cas gathers his things. “I’ll stop by Sunday around three to pick up my check, if that’s alright? That will give you time to consider whether you want to continue to employ me. You can let me know then.”

Bobby eyes him as some of the senior officers and hospital administrators used to sometimes, attempting to ferret out whether he was being sincere or somehow putting them on (it was a toss-up most of the time, truth be told). “Yeah, alright.”

“See you then,” he smiles before he leaves. He climbs into his car and releases a breath from the bottom of his lungs.

On Sunday afternoon, Cas arrives at the Singer/Winchester home, where there is a loud argument in progress. He knocks on the door. Dean opens it and ushers him inside, then slams the door behind him and keeps arguing over the football game on TV.

“And I bet that Cas’ll tell you that you need to have someone here, and you need to have them feed you and change your diaper and do all the shit for you that you need done!”

“And I’m sayin’ I don’t want anyone touchin’ me! It’s embarrassin’!”

“I get it, Bobby, but you gotta suck it up! I don’t want you getting sick or ending up in the hospital!”

“Why should I do it?”

Dean wipes a hand down his face. “Cas,” he moans, “will you please tell him that it’s your job to change his pants and he’s gotta let you do it?”

“I don’t get into people’s pants without their consent, Mr. Winchester,” he says evenly. Dean raises his brows, and Cas lets the ambiguity of his comment sit in the air. “And I don’t know if I still have a job.” Both men’s expressions turn confused. “My impression is that I was given a week, as a trial period, I assumed. Today is our opportunity to discuss whether I’ll still be providing care to Mr. Singer.”

“Seriously?” Dean grumbles softly, as if to himself. Louder, he continues, “Look, he knows he needs the service but he’d rather die than ask for help, and if he keeps it up that’s exactly what’s gonna happen, so...just do what he needs. He gets over himself eventually.”

He’s burnt out and scared and desperate, Cas reminds himself to counteract his revulsion at Dean’s statement that he should essentially force care on the man. “If he did ‘get over himself eventually,’ I assume you wouldn’t have a problem keeping workers,” he manages to say. Dean glares at him while Bobby huffs appreciatively.
“You know what? I thought this was gonna work with you, but I don’t think it is,” Dean growls through clenched teeth.

“Alright,” Cas says with a dismissive air, knowing the man is just pissed. “Mr. Singer?”

“Don’t need anybody, like I said before,” he barks, though even he doesn’t seem completely convinced.

“Alright, then.” He picks up the paycheck on the table, then sets his eyes on both of them. “Do you have a piece of paper I can use? I’d like to write a discharge summary and recommendations.”

Neither of the men seem to know what the hell’s happening, which amuses Cas to no end. Dean hands him a notebook and a pen, and Cas sits at the table and writes. When he’s finished, he makes a second copy, then hands one to Dean and holds the other for Bobby to read. They both finish around the same time and stare at Cas, not knowing what to think.

“Thank you for the opportunity,” Cas says. He nods at the TV, which is playing a football game—the Vikings versus the Rams. He takes back Dean’s copy of the discharge recommendations, scribbles something on it, and returns it. He does the same to Bobby’s and holds it out so he can read it, then smirks at him before he takes his leave. Planting seeds, he thinks as he drives home.

Chapter End Notes

Referenced in this chapter:
“Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage” by Alfred Lansing.

Next chapter: What did Cas write, and will it make a difference?
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Cas the strategist. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dean thinks about Cas and his “discharge summary” and “recommendations” the rest of the weekend. On Monday morning, he gets up at his usual 5:30am, takes a shower, shaves, and puts laundry away. At 6:15, he goes into Bobby’s room. Bobby is awake, as usual. He’s staring at the ceiling, lost in thought, it seems.

“Hey, Bobby,” Dean murmurs, both because things are tense between them and because he doesn’t want to startle him.

“Mornin’,” he gruffs. Dean moves Bobby’s arms and waits as the inevitable muscle spasms in his arms and legs take over, strong enough to move his blanket a bit and put his arms right back where they’d been. When they finish, Dean begins the range of motion exercises they do daily. They don’t speak, but then again, they don’t usually speak first thing in the morning. Not these days, anyway.

When his exercises are done, Dean gets the Hoyer lift—a large, metal contraption on wheels with chains that helps him transfer Bobby from his bed to his chair without breaking Dean’s back. The thing looks like part torture device, part sex toy. He rolls his uncle to his side, shimmies the wet mattress pad from under him, and slides the mesh sling in place. He gives him a quick once-over to check for pressure sores or rashes, then rolls him back into place and attaches the chains. He pumps a hydraulic arm to lift Bobby into the air, then releases it to place him on the commode. When he’s finished using it, he lifts him slightly, cleans him up, and places him in his shower chair to take him to the bathroom. In the bathroom he washes his uncle’s body, taking care to clean him thoroughly, and takes several minutes to carefully shave his face. When he’s finished, he dries him and wheels him back into his room, where he transfers him onto the bed again. He wipes cream and powder on his buttocks, then rolls him to one side, wedges his diaper under him, and rolls him to the other side to wiggle it into place, pull it between his stiff legs, and tape it. He slides pants, a shirt, and socks onto him. Finally, he lifts him with the Hoyer again and places him in his reclining wheelchair, adjusting him in the same dance they do every morning. He combs his hair, tucks a light throw around him, and wheels him into the living room, where he turns on the TV. He turns back to the bedroom to get the commode, cleans it out, then washes up and heads into the kitchen.

It’s 7:30 now—breakfast time. Dean’s making toast and eggs this morning, like most weekday mornings. Bobby stares at the TV screen. While the pan is warming, Dean grabs Bobby’s morning meds (he sets his pill box weekly) and gives them to him along with some water. Bobby takes all five of them in one go. He gets back to the kitchen and cracks the eggs into the pan, but the pan is too hot and they burn. Dean huffs and rolls his eyes.

Breakfast is quiet as Dean feeds Bobby and shoves food into his own mouth without tasting it. When they’re finished, he refills Bobby’s water and doesn’t bother cleaning up the dishes. He doesn’t bother prepping lunch as he normally would, either, because they don’t have a worker today so he’ll be coming home anyway and he just doesn’t have the fucking energy.

“Alright, I’ll see you at noon,” Dean says, swallowing down his frustration, fatigue, and guilt.
“Yeah, alright,” Bobby answers. He hesitates. “You, uh, got that book on your tablet thingie?”

Oh yeah. We were supposed to do that together and ended up fighting instead. “Um, no. Didn’t get a chance to download it yet.”

“Oh.”

The disappointment Dean sees makes him pause. He’s used to the man’s grouchy exterior. This is new, different, and makes him uncomfortable. “I promise I’ll do it tonight.”

“Yeah, alright.” He turns and stares back at the television.

Dean frowns. “Hang on a sec,” he says, picking up his iPad. Though he’s already running late, he downloads the app along with a free trial, then the book. “Done.”

Bobby looks up at him, then at the iPad. “Can you turn off the TV and set it up to play?”

“Sure,” Dean says, crinkling his forehead. He starts the book (on the second chapter, where they’d left off from Cas’ iPad) and places it near his uncle so he can hear it. “This alright?” Bobby nods, so Dean shrugs on his coat and grabs his keys. He’s just about out the door when Bobby calls, “Dean?”

Dean takes a deep breath and turns, not really having time or energy for whatever he needs but never willing to deny him, either. “Yeah?”

“Thank you,” he says quietly, averting his eyes.

A sudden sadness clenches his chest. “You’re welcome, Uncle Bobby,” he nods, then closes the door more softly than he’d planned.

At the garage, he falls into his usual pattern of busyness, his work punctuated by thoughts of his uncle. Every so often, he glances across the street at The Bee’s Knees, where Cas probably is right now. All last week, Dean was able to work right through the day. He worried, of course, but that time he didn’t have to leave and return was spent productively and he was able to take Sunday off. It was the first day off he’d had off in forever, it seemed. When his thoughts about his uncle’s situation clutter his brain too much, he locks himself in his office, pulls out the paper Cas wrote up, and reads it again:

Discharge Summary for Mr. Robert Singer

Mr. Singer is an intelligent man with interests ranging from literature to politics and local news to trivia and game shows and undoubtedly more. He appears to care deeply for his nephew, Dean Winchester, and it appears the feeling is mutual. Mr. Singer appears to want to please his nephew and make things easier on him, yet struggles with what that means for him. Mr. Singer is passionate about what he believes is right for him and is fiercely independent. At times this independence manifests itself as pridefulness that leads him to make decisions that would not be recommended for his health. If health complications occur as a result, he may require full-time nursing that his nephew cannot provide, as much as he wants to be able to do so. However, Mr. Singer values his ability to make those decisions, even if those decisions jeopardize his health and may lead to eventual placement in a nursing facility and potentially a loss of guardianship over himself.

In my professional opinion, Mr. Singer is in need of nursing facility level of care due to the effects of Primary-Progressive Multiple Sclerosis. This care can be provided at home rather than a nursing facility if he allows the full spectrum of services to be done. His caregiver, Mr. Winchester, is in need of respite, as he is his uncle’s only caregiver and appears to be “burning out” from physical and emotional fatigue. He is trying very hard to give his uncle the best care (even though his attempts are
sometimes thwarted by Mr. Singer) and appears to have the best of intentions in terms of his uncle’s health, yet he appears to have difficulty understanding his uncle’s disease from a psychological standpoint. The presenting problems, if they are to be resolved, will need to be addressed by both parties frankly, with a willingness to speak and listen to each other about their feelings about the illness, the caregiving responsibilities, and the impact of each man’s decisions on the other.

My recommendations are as follows:

- **For Mr. Singer to exert as much agency over his life as possible**
- **For Mr. Singer to find a way to accept and engage the assistance of others beyond his nephew for his personal care and other human needs, and for him to participate in meeting those needs with a regularity that will keep him as healthy as possible**
- **For Mr. Singer to expand his experiences beyond his home and television (for example, reading/listening to audiobooks, socializing in private and public settings, exploring interests he may have put aside because of his illness)**
- **For Mr. Winchester to work five days per week and take two days off per week**
- **For Mr. Winchester to allow nursing and/or personal care providers to assist Mr. Singer with his ADLs weekday mornings and evenings in addition to lunchtime and at least one longer block of time per week so that Mr. Winchester has a break for self-care, socialization, and/or preferred activities**
- **For Mr. Winchester to understand and support Mr. Singer’s wishes and need for independence as much as possible**
- **For Mr. Singer and Mr. Winchester to engage in interactions that nurture their relationship as uncle/nephew rather than care receiver/caregiver**
- **For Mr. Singer to find a better football team to cheer for. The Vikings are hacks.**

Dean’s eyes water, not for the first time in the last twenty-four hours. He reads the paper again. It’s weird that this irritating know-it-all who speaks like a professor and looks like a model has known them for a week—hell, only ten, twelve hours max—and has figured all of this out about them. He sighs and glances at the clock. He has to go. He collects his keys and drives home to give Bobby lunch and check his diaper.

“Hey, Bobby,” Dean greets him. The audiobook is still playing, and Bobby opens his eyes. He seems peaceful, thoughtful.

“Hey, son,” he responds.

They don’t talk about the words that Cas wrote that day, or the next day. By Wednesday night, Bobby breaks the strange tension between them.

“I’ve been thinkin’ about what Cas said,” he starts.

Dean, who’d been emptying the dishwasher while waiting for the dryer to stop, comes to the living room and sits. “Me too,” he says with a sigh. “I’ve been an asshole, huh.”

“Yeah, well, me too,” Bobby admits. “It’s, uh… it’s hard to admit needin’ help. I don’t wanna be like this, and I sure as hell hate doin’ this to you.”
"You're not doing anything to me," Dean says. Bobby pins him with a doubtful glare. "Other than firing people or making 'em quit, I guess," he concedes. He digs at the burning in his eyes. "Still, the stuff you have goin’ on isn’t your fault, and I should be more sensitive, you know? I wouldn’t like people up in my business, either. I just worry about you a lot, and the garage and shit. And, well, it’s hard for me to ask for help, too.” He rubs roughly at his face. “But I hate what I’m becoming.”

“Naw, none of that, now. You’re a good kid. Just, neither one of us ain’t ever been good at askin’ for help. Always hafta be pushed into it,” Bobby observes. Dean nods. They sit in silence until Bobby utters, “I can try.”

Dean, who’s been staring at his hands clasped between his knees, looks up. “Try what?”

“Lettin’ someone help. All of it, the whole enchilada. Shit, this is gonna be embarrassin’. ” He blows a hard breath from puffed cheeks. “See if Cas maybe wants to do it still. If you’re okay with him comin’ in.”

“It’s alright by me if it’s alright with you, Bobby,” Dean says, the heaviness draining from his chest. “I’ll go talk to him tomorrow. The week’s almost done, so maybe he can start back up on Monday, if he still wants it.”

“Be kinda stupid to work with our stubborn asses, but I get the feeling he likes ‘em stubborn.” They chuckle a little before Bobby adds, “But if we’re doin’ this, you gotta do it, too. See if maybe he can help out at supper or somethin’.”

“I got that,” Dean starts, but throws up his hands in surrender at Bobby’s glare. “Alright, we can try it, Jesus.”

The next morning is sunny and clear. Dean doesn’t usually notice the weather anymore, unless it’s miserable. Today he breathes in deeply and lets his shoulders relax before he slides into his Impala and drives into work. He’s heading in a little early so that he has time to take a longer break mid-morning, when The Bee’s Knees is past their early morning rush. He could’ve called Cas, he supposes, but thinks that his groveling is better done in person. He knows he looks pretty damn pathetic these days, and he’s hoping to use that to his advantage. He sighs. He kind of hates having to run back to Cas with his tail between his legs, both because the guy keeps pissing him off and because he knows a lot of the reason why he’s pissed is his own guilt and frustration, which he took out on him. Plus, there’s just something about him that lights a fire under his skin. Just his pretty face, probably. It certainly isn’t his sparkling personality.

At 9:45 it looks pretty dead at the coffee shop, so he crosses the street and heads inside. Kevin and a young woman around his age are slouched at the counter, talking. They stand up straighter when Dean walks in. “Hi… Dean, right?” Kevin asks.

“You got it,” he smiles. “Medium hazelnut coffee, three sugars.” Kevin nods and rings him up while the young woman goes to make his coffee. “Is Cas here?”

“Yeah, one sec,” he says, counting out his change because Dean refuses to pay for coffee with a damn debit card. He slams the register shut as the woman returns with Dean’s coffee. “Channing, can you get Cas?”

Channing, the young woman, nods and peeks through the window of the door that separates the kitchen from the rest of the shop. She smiles. “Oh my gosh, wait, I have to record this!” she gushes. She pulls her phone out of her pocket and opens the door slowly, music becoming louder as she does so. Kevin slides behind her to watch, and Dean shifts his position to peek in, too. His eyebrows practically hit his hairline at what he sees.
The first thing he notices is the music—“You Shook Me All Night Long,” nice—and then he notices a man who looks like Cas but can’t possibly be Cas because he’s being very un-Cas-like. Channing and Kevin stifle giggles as Cas, wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and a black apron covered in flour, stalks toward Charlie with a rhythmic swing of his hips. She’s standing in place, bouncing her head and laughing as he acts out the words and sings:

‘Cause the walls start shaking  
The earth was quaking  
My mind was aching  
And we were making it and you  
Shook me all night long

He reaches her and dances with her to the beat, one hand gripping hers and the other on the small of her back. It doesn’t look like the first time they’ve done this today or ever, judging by the flour on her back and their proximity. An irrational flare of jealousy rises in him. Cas had implied that they were close, but not close close. He swallows it down as he watches him sing to her with exaggerated facial expressions. It wouldn’t be the first time he had the hots for a guy who was taken. Not that he has the hots for him, because he definitely doesn’t. At all. He’s attractive, that’s all. Even more so when he’s strutting around singing AC/DC. But that doesn’t matter because the hot, smart guy who cared enough to think about his needs even while pissing him off is taken. Very taken. Which is fine. Dean’s just a little lonely, that’s all. That’s what this is.

Cas notices the audience and stops suddenly. Charlie stops too and laughs when she sees them, waving goofily. Channing tells him someone is here to see him, and he looks back and locks eyes with Dean, whose breath catches in his throat (nerves, that’s all). He nods and holds a finger up to tell Dean to wait, then mutters “That video goes nowhere” to Channing before he disappears. Charlie bounces out of the kitchen.

“Hey, Deanie Beanie!” she smiles. He returns the smile with less enthusiasm than usual, not quite able to recover from his strange, unwarranted feeling of disappointment. She frowns and leans closer to speak to him confidentially. “You doing okay?” Embarrassed, he waves off her concern. She peers at him and adds, “Figured you’re probably up shit creek again with the home health aide thing. Cas mentioned he was fired.”

Dean is relieved she misattributed the source of his upset, but then winces when he processes her words. “That’s not exactly—”

“Well, his words were ‘After a trial period, they determined they would no longer be utilizing my services’ or something like that,” she smiles. “That’s Cas-speak for fired.”

“It wasn’t…” He stops himself and sighs. “It was a hasty decision.”

Charlie’s eyes widen and she nods as Cas emerges from the kitchen sans apron, his smooth, tanned skin free of flour and his shirt hugging his body. Dean sucks in a deep breath. “Hey, Cas,” he says hesitantly. “Um, can we talk?”

“Certainly,” the man nods. He gestures to a table far from the counter, which Dean appreciates.

“How may I assist you?”

The formality makes him grimace. “Stop talking like you’re an English professor, for one,” he tries to joke. Cas simply stares at him, so Dean exhales heavily. “Um, look, Bobby and I went over your, um, report, and uh, he thought maybe he’d give it a go again, give it a real chance.”

“Alright,” he says. “I’m pleased to hear that. I think it would truly benefit both of you. Would you
like me to provide you with referrals to home care providers? I don’t know a lot of people who do this work privately but I can ask around, or I can provide you with the names and numbers of agencies.”

Dean’s stomach sinks. “Uh, actually, we were kinda hopin’ you’d be willing to come back.”

Cas, who’d been leaning forward with his forearms on the table, leans back in his seat. “Oh. I see.” He breathes quietly, observing Dean for a moment, then comments, “From what I recall, you thought it, quote, ‘wasn’t going to work out with me.’ Why would you want to take back someone you thought wouldn’t work out?”

“I was just pissed, Cas,” Dean admits, though it’s hard for him to do so.

“I cannot have an employer who doesn’t trust me, Mr. Winchester.”

Dean sighs and rubs his neck. “Look, I don’t really know you yet, and you weren’t making him do anything, the stuff he needed to do.”

“And I would take the same tack, Mr. Winchester, if I were rehired, so I ask you again, why do you want me back?”

Dean tugs at his hair. “Because you care,” he says forcefully. “Because you call us on our shit and you don’t take shit from us. Because you respected my uncle enough to want him to meet you. Because your weird way of getting my uncle to agree willingly to services he has never agreed to willingly before actually worked. Because you made him wanna listen to a book instead of stare at the TV, and because he was so excited to tell me about it and thanked me for setting it up for him. Because I… you get that I need a break, too and you don’t judge it. Nobody’s given a shit about us like that.”

Cas’ severe face softens. “What is the schedule you’re proposing?”

“Lunchtime and dinner time, weekdays.”

Cas licks his lips in thought as he studies him with those (really gorgeous) eyes. “I have conditions.” Dean nods for him to continue. “One, if you have concerns about my approach, ask me about it. I assure you that everything I did with your uncle was to earn his trust.” That’s what Dean suspected, once he actually took time to think about it. He agrees. “Two, when you’re ready, I want to add one bedtime a week, preferably on a night when you can take some time to yourself and socialize or engage in a hobby or another preferred activity.” Dean shakes his head minutely, ready to argue, but Cas looks at him with an arched brow and he nods. “Three, do not call your uncle’s incontinence undergarments ‘diapers’ ever again. Call them by their brand name, call them briefs, call them underwear, whatever, but calling them diapers infantilizes your uncle and strips him of his dignity.”

Dean hadn’t thought of it that way—“diapers” was just a shortcut word to him, the same word his father used—and he feels horrible. He closes his eyes to the shame and turns his head away, but feels a large hand on his arm and opens his eyes to Cas touching him. He removes it as soon as he has Dean’s attention, though, and the welcome warmth and touch of another human disappears. He wishes he could chase it and cling to it. He settles for clinging to Cas’ next words instead. “I don’t believe you do that on purpose. It’s very obvious to me that you love your uncle and you are trying your very best to do everything you can for him. It’s admirable, and self-sacrificing, and it has worn you to the bone. With some respite, I’m quite confident that you will be able to feel more like yourself again.”

Dean breathes deeply. “I’m not sure what that is anymore,” he admits in the tiniest voice he’s ever heard from himself. “Not even sure I ever knew.”
“You’ll figure it out,” he assures him. The warmth in his voice fills him like cocoa after a winter’s day spent outside. “So, if you and your uncle agree to these things, I’m happy to return.”

Having never danced a jig in his life, Dean isn’t going to start now—but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to. Cas agreeing to return fills Dean with lightness and hope and relief. He closes his eyes once more to relieve the burning sensation, then opens them to see Cas’ deep, serious eyes boring into his soul. He swallows and offers a small smile. Cas offers a smaller but genuine one in return.

The following Monday, Cas is there at 11:30 as promised (he calls to be sure—too many home health aides have stood them up before), and he’s there again when Dean gets home from work. Dean is utterly grateful and relieved that he’s there, yet a little weirded out by it at the same time. He warms the enchiladas (he thought it comical to make enchiladas to celebrate Bobby agreeing to “the whole enchilada” of services) and sets the dish on the counter while he pours drinks. Cas grabs plates and sets them at the table in the dining room. Dean laughs at his mistake. “We eat in front of the TV, Cas.”

“Oh, my apologies. I assumed that was just Bobby’s preferred lunch arrangement. I didn’t realize it applied to dinner as well.”

Before Dean can wave it off, Bobby pipes up. “Keep ’em there. We can eat in there for once. I stare at the damn TV all the time.” Dean can hardly pick up his jaw from the floor. They haven’t eaten at the table since his Aunt Karen died years ago. Dean fondly remembers lots of boisterous times at that table. He smiles as he brings the food to the table and starts to dish the enchiladas onto plates, but realizes there’s only two.

“You’re not eating, Cas?”

“Oh, of course not. This is your meal, not mine. I’ll eat when I get home.”

“The hell you aren’t. You’re gonna be here, you’re gonna eat here. House rules,” Bobby insists with a huff. The corner of Dean’s mouth turns up. His Aunt Karen used to say that all the time.

“I assure you it’s not necessary—”

“I assure you it is, so get a plate and sit your ass down.”

Cas chuckles and raises his hands in surrender, returning quickly with a plate and scooping an enchilada onto it. Dean smiles wider as he sits next to Bobby, picking up his fork to feed him. Cas gently taps on his shoulder.

“Excuse me,” he says, ushering Dean to the next chair over. Cas replaces him and gives Bobby his medications, then offers him bites of the enchilada. Dean isn’t sure what to do. He hasn’t eaten a meal with Bobby without feeding him in a long time. “Eat,” Cas commands gently. So he does, sitting and focusing on his meal the entire time, then goes for seconds. Bobby mentions that they finished the Shackleton book and decided to read a survivalist story called *Into the Wild* next.

It’s a really, really good dinner.

On Tuesday, Dean heats a pizza casserole that thawed in the fridge all day. On Wednesday, Dean makes chicken noodle soup and Cas manages to feed it to Bobby way better than Dean ever feeds soup to him. And on Thursday, Dean gets a surprise: Cas in their kitchen, along with Bobby, who rarely goes there.

“You didn’t have to cook,” Dean says. “I was planning to cook.”
“My apologies,” Cas says, though he doesn’t seem all that sorry. “We watched a man make meatloaf on TV and it made us both crave it. Mr. Singer said his wife had a recipe for it. We managed to find it, so I went out and bought the ingredients, and here we are.”

“You’re making Aunt Karen’s meatloaf?” Dean squeals with glee.

“Well, I am making a valiant attempt,” Cas says with a soft uptick of his lips that makes Dean’s belly swoop (because he’s a nice-looking guy, that’s all—it’s definitely not because he’s taking care of Dean by making one of his favorite comfort foods).

His “valiant attempt” is awesome. Dean has three helpings, inhaling each one not because he’s in a rush to feed both his uncle and himself before everything gets cold, but because it’s so damn good.

“Almost as good as I remember,” Bobby says, swallowing a bite Cas offers.

“It’s always better when a loved one makes it,” Cas says, preparing another bite, “but I’m pleased you’re enjoying it. You must have many fond memories of your wife.”

Dean freezes. They don’t really talk about Aunt Karen.

“Sure do,” Bobby says wistfully. Dean watches his uncle slowly lower his emotional shield. “Took her a lot of tries to get this recipe right. When I first met her, hell, she didn’t even want to touch raw hamburger,” he chuckles. “And then she finally got over that, but she’d burn it ‘cause she got impatient and just turned the oven up instead of waitin’ the extra time on the lower setting. It’s why it’s got so much cheese and sauce—’cause she figured she’d cover up the burnt taste that way.” Cas laughs out loud and Bobby joins him. Dean blinks back the sudden stinging of his eyes at Bobby’s laughter and tamps down the flutter of his belly at Cas’.

“Karen was a smart woman,” Cas observes as he brings the straw of Bobby’s drink to his mouth.

“Sure was,” Bobby nods, then takes a sip. “Dean, you’ll remember this. This one time…”

Dean watches as Bobby launches into a story and Cas listens, offering him bites of meatloaf and warm smiles. He takes a breath as something loosens in his chest and listens to Bobby tell Cas about the one and only time Aunt Karen went camping with them. It feels good to hear it again, and even better to feel like he’s simply a nephew reminiscing with his uncle.

Chapter End Notes

Cas is making progress...

Next time: Football, friendship, and Cas’ wives.

Referenced in this chapter:
“You Shook Me All Night Long,” AC/DC
“Into the Wild” by Jon Krakauer
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Progress! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It takes another two weeks and a football game for Bobby to really let Cas in.

Oh, they’d talk a bit here and there about books, about the weather, about the military. He’d even gotten him to open up a bit about his wife, in Dean’s presence. It was gratifying to watch uncle and nephew share some memories. Bobby had been a bit standoffish the next day, likely embarrassed about revealing so much. The following Monday, though, it had been back to business as usual. That business was eating and cooking and chatting. That business was not toileting, because as much as he’d apparently agreed to let Cas do everything, he was having a hard time following through on that. Cas warned Dean it was happening and encouraged him to give it some time. Dean had been a little grumpy about it, but shut his mouth. Perhaps he was trying not to be a hypocrite—after all, Cas is pretty sure Dean’s going to have a hard time holding up his end of the bargain, too, likely resisting doing anything for himself when the time comes. After letting them get comfortable with him for nearly a month, Cas decides the time is right to infiltrate their reluctance and blow it up from the inside.

“I wondered if I might impose on you, Mr. Singer,” Cas asks on a Thursday night after dinner. “This is probably inappropriate to ask, but I know you’re a football fan and my favorite team is playing tonight, so I wondered if I might be able to watch it here. Ordinarily I would watch it at home, but Charlie is having ‘the girls’ over tonight to drink cocktails and prepare favors for her friend’s wedding on Saturday, and as you can imagine, I’d rather not be there.” He smiles and shrugs his shoulders, hoping he’s conveying a “help a brother out” vibe.

Bobby frowns in thought, then says, “Sure, why not? Let’s see if your team is a bunch of hacks.” He glares at Cas. Success, Cas thinks.

“Is it alright with you, Mr. Winchester?” he asks. He’s stayed formal with Dean because it just feels…safer. He got a little too pulled into the man’s vulnerability and soft green eyes when they talked at the shop (he even touched him, which he probably shouldn’t have done but he felt compelled, sensing a need for human contact that Cas knows very well himself). That pull hasn’t weakened since they started spending suppers together. Getting to know the man little by little, he’s found that his early impressions of him are shifting. He knows he needs to tread carefully.

“Sure,” Dean shrugs, not looking sure at all. “Charlie’s not gonna mind?”

Odd question. “No. She’ll probably be glad to get rid of me,” Cas jokes. He notices that this is the first time he’s heard Dean ask about her. Dean turned away a moment ago when he mentioned Charlie’s name, and he seems to go out of his way to avoid talking about her or asking about her if she comes up in their brief conversations. Charlie told him that Dean hasn’t been quite as warm toward her lately. Perhaps he’s having difficulty separating her from the working relationship with Cas. He may have to ask the man about it.

While Dean gets Bobby cleaned up with a new undergarment, Cas packs up the leftovers from
dinner, then collects the dishes and loads the dishwasher. He washes the table and tidies the area, then wanders into the living room to wait, hearing the murmured conversation from the bedroom but not listening in. Instead, he lets his eyes skim the titles on the bookshelves. There’s an array of interests reflected here, from mystery to biographies to the supernatural to mechanics. Fascinating. His mother would have loved the supernatural books. Unfortunately, she might have taken them a little too close to heart. He twists his mouth with a resigned huff and turns to the window, gazing at his own reflection and thinking of nothing.

“So, who you rootin’ for?” Bobby asks when they return to the living room and settle to catch the start of the game.


“Shoulda known,” he grumbles.

“Even if I wasn’t from Massachusetts originally, I’d still cheer for them. They have a great team.”

“Buncha cheaters,” he mutters. “I ain’t forgotten those underinflated footballs.”

“Oh, don’t even bring up Deflategate,” Cas says, rolling his eyes but secretly glad for the debate. “You know that was bullshit.”

“Brady’s gettin’ old and he’s screwin’ up. Lost twice already this season.”

“You know they always start off slow. It’s what they do. Rest up, lure other teams into a false sense of security. And Brady’s still playing well. He’s a much better QB than Cousins.”

“I think you’ve got some screws loose, boy. Cousins is the future of the NFL.”

“And Brady is the present,” Cas retorts. Bobby’s expression—like he’d be pounding on the arms of his chair if he could—makes Cas cheer internally. He loves the passion.

“I’m worried about your mental faculties,” the older man taunts him.

“I’m not crazy. My mother had me tested,” he jokes, quoting one of his favorite sitcoms.

“Sheldon!” Dean shouts in recognition from the armchair, quiet until this moment. “You watch The Big Bang Theory?”

“Religiously—unless my team is playing that night, of course,” he answers. Dean looks at him with a small smile, breathtaking with the spark of life behind it. “Sheldon and Amy are my favorites,” he continues, simply to fight off his own spark of life in his chest.

“I love Leonard and Penny, though my favorite’s probably Howard. I like Raj, too,” Dean grins. His eyes are shining. Cas stuffs away the sudden flare of his heart. Dean is hitting on another one of Cas’ intangibles—helping people make true connections with others. “Did you see—”

“Alright, you two, the game’s startin’,” Bobby grumps. Probably just as well he interrupted, Cas thinks. They turn to watch the opening kickoff.

As the game progresses, Cas pokes at Bobby with little comments about his team and the Patriots, just to rile him up and make him argue. He’s quite proud of himself when Bobby calls him an “idjit,” the term being an insult but an affectionate one. Every so often, he notices Dean glancing at him. The few times he glances back, Dean flashes him a quick smile and turns back to the screen. He’s not sure how to read it. He thinks he should probably stop glancing back at him...or stop glancing at him
all on his own when Dean’s not looking. The way his attention is pulled toward the man is a bit disconcerting.

It’s late by the time the game ends (the Patriots won, much to Bobby’s dismay), but it’s been a good night all in all, and Cas hopes he can extend that just a little longer. “Thanks very much for your hospitality,” he says. “May I assist you with your evening routine, Mr. Singer?” When Bobby looks at him and wavers, he adds with a smirk, “I want a few more minutes to gloat.”

“You’re an asshole,” he grumbles, punching a laugh out of Cas. “Yeah, come on. I’ll tell you what to do.”

“You do seem to enjoy that,” he jokes as he takes the wheelchair and turns toward the bedroom. Dean stands to follow and opens his mouth to say something, but Cas shakes his head and waves him away.

The bedtime routine is like many bedtime routines he’s done, yet unique because it is the first with this person and the first time that Bobby has entrusted the task to anyone but Dean that he knows of. He patiently listens to Bobby tell him what to do and follows his instructions, assessing his health silently as he goes. His skin looks irritated, which is no surprise, but there are no pressure sores (though he wants to keep an eye on an area around his tailbone). He is very stiff, as he expected. He spasms every so often, and his feet are swollen, likely from an accumulation of lymphatic fluid due to lack of movement. He should be elevating his feet. He makes mental notes to himself as he cleans and treats Bobby’s skin and changes the linens and incontinence briefs. Bobby is doing remarkably well with this change in routine, all things considered. Perhaps this is because he’s keeping up a conversation with the man about why the Patriots will make it to the Super Bowl again this year and Bobby is arguing back.

When he’s finished the tasks he’s been told, he says, “Alright, Mr. Singer, I’ll see you tomorrow around lunchtime. Charlie said she’s going to make you pumpkin muffins.”

“Those sugar-free ones with cream cheese frosting?”

“The very same. Good night, Mr. Singer,” he grins. He turns off the light and is about to leave when Bobby says his name.

“It, uh, it’s alright to call me Bobby,” he says. “And thanks for helpin’ out tonight. I know I haven’t made it easy. On you or Dean.”

“Well, it’s not easy, is it?” Cas says kindly. He smiles and adds, “You’re welcome. It’s no problem and I was happy to do it. See you tomorrow, Bobby.”

Cas walks quietly down the hall, hoping not to disturb Dean, though as it turns out Dean is still in the living room. “The point of me getting him to bed is so you can do something for yourself, or go to bed at the very least,” Cas says to Dean gently as he gathers his coat and keys.

“I know.” He rubs his neck and stands. “Uh, just out of curiosity, how much do you like football?”

“I can take it or leave it,” Cas shrugs with a chuckle. Dean chuckles, too, his smile glowing in the dim light of the one tabletop lamp still on. He has a gorgeous smile that he doesn’t wear enough.

“Thanks, Cas,” he says, arms folded. “It’s weird. Not quite sure what to do with myself now.”

“Get some sleep?” Cas suggests.

“Yeah, I guess that would be the smart thing to do. But now I’m all pumped up, like I have energy or
Cas smiles to himself. This is what usually happens when caregivers are given time away from their responsibilities. “Well, maybe this can be a regular thing. I did recommend that you find some time to do some things for yourself.”

“Maybe so. Um, so thanks.” He smiles again, and they can’t seem to stop staring at each other, even though Cas knows he needs to get ahold of himself. “Oh,” Dean adds, his smile dropping, “tell Charlie thanks for letting us keep you here so late.”

Cas isn’t sure what he means, but he doesn’t want to get into it tonight, so he simply answers, “I’m sure she was quite happy to have the house free of testosterone for an evening. Good night, Mr. Winchester.”

Dean hesitates, as if he has something to say, but instead he raises his hand. “Bye, Cas.”

At home, Cas tiptoes in quietly so as not to disturb Charlie and Jo, who’ve fallen asleep together on the couch. He’s not surprised. Jo’s a lightweight who works a lot of late nights, so having tonight off combined with a little alcohol seems to have done her in, and Charlie is usually dead to the world by 9:00 because of the bakery. He kisses each of them on their heads before turning off the TV. It wakes Jo, who extends her arm for a hug. He leans down and she practically chokeholds him until he settles into the space next to her, where she can snuggle properly. Charlie calls Jo her baguette—crusty on the outside, soft and squishy on the inside. It’s a fitting description for the tough-as-nails woman who tosses drunks out of the bar and squeals at every dog she passes. Jo doesn’t let a lot of people into her heart. Charlie has been an exception (having worn her down with her relentless optimism, Cas suspects), and Cas is another. “Hey. How was the game?” she murmurs groggily.


“That’s good. I’m jealous. We watched a Say Yes to the Dress marathon. I can’t tell you how many times I had to swallow down puke.”

“You’re so romantic, Jo.”

“Damn straight.”

“Hardly.”

Jo snickers and says, “Well, that makes two of us.” She wakes Charlie, who whines about it until Jo kisses her cheek. “Let’s go to bed, Red,” she prompts her. The three of them hoist themselves off the couch and Cas watches fondly as the couple shuffles to bed arm-in-arm. He follows and turns into the bathroom, then his room, easing himself under the covers and sighing—over what, he’s not sure.

“So, progress on the Bobby Singer front?” Charlie asks the next morning when Cas enters the kitchen at The Bee’s Knees, a cup of dark roast in his hand. Jo trails behind him, drinking the same. Today he’s helping Charlie with a large order for a couple of hours.

“Yes,” he smiles proudly. “The game went well, he let me get him to bed, and he even wants me to call him Bobby.”

Charlie’s eyes widen. “Wow! Give it up!” she cheers, her hand in the air. He slaps it. “Now, how are things on the Dean Winchester front?”

“Yeah, Cas, any action on Dean Winchester’s front? Or are you more of a ‘take-him-from-the-back’ kind of guy?” Jo jokes, wiggling her eyebrows. He rolls his eyes and shoves her shoulder.
“You are so crass,” he mutters as he takes a long sip of his too-hot coffee to avoid thinking about the idea she’s planted.

“Jo,” Charlie chides, then says devilishly, “You know Cas’ll take him any way he can.”

“I am not talking about the nephew of my client like that,” he grumbles, “and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t, either. Besides, he’s my employer.”

“No, Bobby’s your employer. Dean’s his hot-as-hell nephew who flirted with you when he first set his eyes on you.”

He sighs, regretting telling Charlie that. “It doesn’t matter. I’m doing a job, and that job benefits Mr. Winchester, ergo he’s my de facto employer. Besides, that’s how he defines the relationship—they are both my employers. Not to mention he’s Bobby’s relative.”

“‘Ergo,’ ‘de facto,’ jeez,” Jo says as she rolls her eyes. “Speak English so the plebeians understand, would ya? I’m way too young, fun, and beautiful for your Mensa lingo.”

He’s not fooled by Jo’s attempts to downplay her intelligence. “While you are young, fun, and quite beautiful, you also used the word ‘plebeians,’ so you’re fooling no one.” He washes his hands, drapes an apron over himself, and hauls a flour bag to the baking table, then measures out several scoops into bowls. “But thank you for tolerating me despite your clear superiority over me in both appearance and relatability.”

“We don’t tolerate you, hubs,” Jo says, snaking an arm around his middle and hugging his back. The couple jokingly declared him their “husband” not long after the women started dating, and he happily took on the title and the affectionate but platonic touching that came with it. It felt good to be part of something, at least, and it met a deep need for nurturance and touch within him. The wife thing even caught on with some of the women who frequent the bakery. He has more “wives” than anyone he knows, which is amusing to the gay man. “We looooove you,” she drawls.

“Love to harass me,” he mutters.

“Well, yeah. Ugh, I suppose I should go home and get some more sleep. I have to work tonight. Walk me out, babe?”

Charlie smiles and nods, leading the way. A few seconds later, she sticks her head through the door. “Your presence is requested by your wives.”

“Which ones?” he teases as he shucks his apron.

“The SAHMs,” she answers, pronouncing it “Sams.” He smiles. The group of stay at home mothers are some of the most delightful people he knows, and also some of the raunchiest—and he was in the military. They come in every Friday and always ask for him.

“There he is!” Diana yells from across the room. “Hellooo, handsome!”

“Diana, already into the booze?” he jokes.

“You say coffee, I say tequila,” she teases back. Charlie and Jo have stopped to chat with them (Jo reluctantly, probably, though he thinks she’d get along quite well with them); Diana is joined by Lacey, Taylor, and Brie. All the ladies stand for hugs, which he’s happy to give. They harass him about his dismal (okay, nonexistent) dating life, then Charlie opens her gigantic, meddling mouth and mentions Dean.
“I smell potential!” Diana sing-songs with a wide grin.

“No, that’s the rotting of my love life you smell,” he comments wryly. But they won’t let it go, and all six of them harass him until he finally says with frustration and a little bit of an edge, “Listen, stop. It’s not happening.” He softens his tone with, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to wither away in peace until I die alone.”

Six women coo and fuss over him then. “We wouldn’t let you die alone,” Jo assures him. “We’re your wives.”

“Us too, sweetie!” Taylor chimes in.

“Great. Six wives. Can't you just let me die alone? Please? I’m begging you. Let me die alone.”

They laugh uproariously and it takes down the longing and loneliness rolling in his gut. Jo looks at her phone and says she really has to get some sleep, so she gives both Charlie and Cas hugs and kisses and loudly calls “Bye, hubs! Bye, wifey!” as she heads out. Cas and Charlie say their goodbyes, then Charlie says “Come on, hubby, we got work to do” and tugs him by the hand to the kitchen.

Neither of them notice Dean in line.

Chapter End Notes

Six wives! Poor Cas! I think he needs a husband... ;P

Next chapter: Why is Dean in his underwear?

Referenced in this chapter:
The Big Bang Theory, CBS
Say Yes to the Dress, TLC
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

So how much did Dean hear, exactly?

Brief warning at the end--nothing very explicit, but just wanted you to be aware.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After an awkward several days of knowing Cas’ secret (or maybe not so secret, just secret from him), Dean can’t take it anymore. He has to share this with someone. And since he doesn’t have a lot of someones in his life… “Okay, so Cas is in one of those plural marriages,” Dean gossips to Bobby the following Wednesday.

“Plural marriage? What the hell’s that?”

“When you’re married to more than one person? Like, he has more than one wife?”

Bobby’s eyes widen as he frowns. “Who the hell would want that? Twice the nagging.”

“Twice the sex,” Dean shrugs.

“Doubtful.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Dean snickers half-heartedly as he finishes dressing his uncle.

“How do you know that?” Bobby asks after a few minutes of silence. “He ain’t told us much about himself. Only ever mentions that Charlie woman he lives with.”

“I saw him at the coffee shop with both of them last Friday morning. They were talking with a bunch of women, then the not-Charlie wife had to leave and she hugged and kissed them both and called them her husband and wife. And then Charlie called him hubby, too.”

“Huh. Well, I guess if he’s happy.”

“Yeah.” Dean rolls Bobby into the living room and turns on the TV, then scoops the slow cooker oatmeal he made for breakfast into bowls and feeds his uncle, leaving his untouched.

“What’s eatin’ at you, boy?” Bobby asks when he’s finished the oatmeal.

Dean purses his lips. “Nothin’, just… I don’t know.”

Bobby eyes him shrewdly. “You got a thing for him, don’t ya?”

“No!” he cries indignantly, squinting his eyes and folding his arms.

“Aw, hell, kid. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t!”

“Alright, if you say so.”
Dean dumps the bowls in the sink, then sits on the couch and folds socks aggressively before he has to leave for work. He really doesn’t have a thing for him. Really. Yes, the guy is hot. He’d have to be dead not to find the tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed man with the perfect hands and the muscled arms physically attractive. Anyone would. And yeah, he’s also compassionate and patient, and he likes to read and watch nerdy comedies, and he has a great laugh... But none of that matters, because he’s not actually interested in him. And even if he was, he’s married. Plus, the guy’s super het, apparently. Dean’s pretty sure having more than one wife moves a guy into the gold level of heterosexuality.

“Seems like he’d be a good friend,” Bobby says after a few minutes. “Wouldn’t hurt you to have a friend, Dean.”

And Bobby’s right, it wouldn’t hurt. He could use a friend, someone who gets his life, his struggles. He has the guys at the garage and he used to have a friend or two from way back when, before he was caring for his uncle, but he doesn’t see anyone outside of work and none of them really get it, anyway. He tried to maintain his friendships outside of work at first, but his father’s shit got worse and Bobby’s condition got worse and he was so tired that after a while he just didn’t have the energy to bother. His life became Take care of Bobby-Deal with Dad-Go to work-Deal with Dad at work-Go home-Take care of Bobby-Deal with Dad some more-Go to bed-Repeat. There wasn’t much room for anything else. But maybe there is now, or there can be. A friend. Yes. Maybe he and Cas can be friends.

When he arrives home from work on Thursday, he begins Operation Friendship. It starts with burgers and Big Bang. He texted Cas at lunch and told him not to worry about supper because he had something special he wanted to make.

“These burgers are Dean’s specialty,” Bobby tells Cas when they sit to eat.

“Well, then, I’m pleased to be partaking,” he grins softly. His eyes flick to Dean for just a moment, inflating Dean’s shriveled sense of self. When Cas takes a bite and sings Dean’s praises, his parched heart drinks in the compliments and starts to throb. Dean rolls his shoulders and refocuses. He can’t be distracted by blue eyes, twinkly smiles, beautiful hands, and sincere compliments.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean says casually (he hopes) over dinner. “Do you want to stay and watch Big Bang Theory with us?” It takes a lot of effort, but he adds, “If you don’t think, um… if you don’t think anyone at home would mind.”

The nurse looks surprised and mildly confused. “Sure,” he says carefully.

“Awesome,” he smiles. He sees Bobby roll his eyes behind Cas.

After supper, Cas asks about the garage. Dean doesn’t talk a lot about the garage because he doesn’t want to upset Bobby, who was very down when he had to leave a few years ago. It had been a messy thing, with lots of yelling between his dad and his uncle. Dean didn’t see any harm in Bobby hanging around the garage, at least, but his father wouldn’t have it. “Too much of a liability” or some bullshit. The real reason, Dean thinks, is that Bobby was getting worse health-wise and Dad couldn’t handle it. On top of that, Dad’s substance use was increasing again, and he probably wanted Bobby off his ass. “Garage is fine,” Dean says evasively.

“Oh? What are you working on? Bobby and I have talked quite a bit about his work at the garage. It sounds like an interesting place. Lots of colorful characters.”

“And those are just the customers,” Bobby jokes. They share a laugh. Dean wonders, not for the first time, just how Cas gets Bobby to talk about things they usually ignore or avoid.
“Camaro. Custom job,” he answers when their laughter fades.

“What’s involved in that?”

“It’s a ground-up restoration, pretty much, so I’m tearing it apart and putting it back together good as new. That’s the hope, anyway.”

Cas turns toward his uncle. “Bobby, did you do restoration work, too?”

“Naw. Left that to Dean. He’s the one with the talent.”

“Ah, I’m sure he has plenty of talent, but it takes talent to build a business up and keep it running, doesn’t it, Bobby?”

“Guess so,” he mutters. Dean’s amused to watch the man’s eyes dart to the side, as if he’s shy.

“I told Bobby I’m surprised he’s not down there bossing them all around.”

It’s Dean’s turn to shift his eyes away. He feels guilty about that. All these years, certainly once his dad left (again)...he could’ve made the effort to bring Bobby to the garage, just to see the guys, the customers. “Yeah. I could use him to get ‘em all in line.”

“I’m certain you do just fine keeping them in line, but maybe we can drop by sometime anyway,” Cas says casually. Dean watches Bobby’s eyes flicker—what’s behind them, he’s not sure.

“I’d just be in the way,” Bobby mumbles eventually.

“You would not,” Dean retorts.

“Your dad—”

“Is a fuck-up who doesn’t have his shit straight. Don’t listen to him. You wanna come in, you come in.” Fire burns in Dean’s belly. He’s angry at his father, angry at multiple sclerosis, angry at himself for not trying to get Bobby into the shop, and even angry at Cas for bringing this up and making them both feel all of this stuff.

“Well, think about it,” Cas says to Bobby as if he didn’t open up a big bag of emotions. “We can go to lunch before and have the second-best burgers around.”

“I only rate second-best burgers?” Bobby retorts gruffly but with an edge of teasing. “What, do I look like a ditchable prom date to you?”

“Bobby, if you were my prom date, I’d take you out for fine cuisine, not burgers. After all, I’d hate to see you drip burger juice all over your pretty dress.” Cas grins at Bobby’s scowl and Dean laughs aloud at them, his ire already forgotten. “But for just a regular date, The Roadhouse has the second-best burgers around. Your nephew’s being the first, of course.” Once again, Dean’s heart soaks up the casual compliment. He wipes his sweaty hands on his jeans.

“The Roadhouse? I know that place. Ellen’s a great gal,” Bobby says quietly. He’s leaving something unsaid, but Dean isn’t sure what. He’s never even heard of the place or this Ellen.

“She is. As long as you stay on her good side,” Cas says, making Bobby laugh. So Cas knows this Ellen, too. Dean feels very much out of the loop.

“How come I don’t know this place?” Dean asks.
“It’s a bar,” Bobby answers, and Dean nods. He doesn’t go to bars, as a rule. He’d had to go to one too many to find his father after a scuffle or because he was sick or incoherent, and they turn his stomach. “Your father and I went there for a while when you were a kid. They closed it for years after her husband died. When she started back up, your aunt was sick and I got this MS shit, so we couldn’t go. Your daddy went a few times but caused too much of a ruckus, so she banned him.” That doesn’t surprise Dean. John Winchester was banned from just about everywhere in the area. “That little one of hers must be all grown up now,” he says to Cas.

“Oh yes, she’s an adult now. Same spitfire personality as her mom. I don’t know what sins Ellen committed, but she paid for them raising Joanna,” Cas laughs, and Bobby chuckles along.

“Well, tell her I say hello, not that I think she’d remember an old coot like me.”

“I’ll let you do that yourself when we go on our date.” Cas sends him a teasing grin, then turns that smile onto Dean. “You should come. We could plan it around your lunch break.”

**Lunch? Out? With Cas? And Bobby?** People go out for lunch all the time with their friends and family, and he could be one of those people again, even if it’s at a bar. The idea is very tempting. “If you can get his ass out, I’m there,” he replies. Cas smiles wider, and it does not make his stomach flip.

The show begins and they turn away from talking and focus on the exploits of the nerdy six (well, five plus Penny, who isn’t really a nerd). Watching the show always makes Dean feel good, but watching it with Cas—a friend, or at least someone he’d like to be a friend—makes it so much better. They watch the show immediately following it, then Bobby yawns and says he’s ready for bed. Cas gets up immediately to assist with a pointed look to Dean to stay put.

Unlike last Thursday, tonight he’d actually have a solid couple of hours to do something for himself. The problem is, he has no idea what. There isn’t really any laundry to do, or dishes. He could vacuum, but Bobby’s going to bed and it’ll be too loud. He could clean the bathroom. He hasn’t done that in a while. He gets the cleaning sprays and rags and gets started. Thirty minutes later, a tap to his shoulder stops him in his tracks. He takes out an earbud and looks up.

“Mr. Winchester, I’m afraid you have a poor understanding of what ‘time to yourself to pursue preferred activities’ actually means.”

Dean grimaces. “It needs to be done,” he explains. Cas does not look impressed. “It does!”

Sighing, Cas relents with raised hands. “Thank you for inviting me to stay. I enjoyed myself.”

“Me too, Cas,” Dean says, rolling his lips together.

Cas gazes at him a moment before saying, “Your uncle is all set. Maybe you could try to find something relaxing to do instead of scrubbing your toilet at 9:30 at night?”

“Always work to be done,” he shrugs.

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean you always have to do it. Sometimes it’s okay to leave the work for another day.” He lays a warm hand on Dean’s shoulder. “Don’t feel guilty for not working or being busy 24/7. Only robots can do that. I should know.”

Dean looks away in embarrassment. Charlie must have told him about the “Mr. Roboto” text he’d sent her during the interview. “I didn’t mean—”

Cas laughs and squeezes the shoulder that’s still under his palm. “Yes, you did, but it’s fine. I know
how I appear to others sometimes.” At that point he seems to notice that he’s holding Dean’s shoulder, because he clears his throat and takes his hand away. Dean already misses the contact. “I know you probably don’t give a damn about my opinion, but I really would like to see you take care of yourself and set limits to what you can do. Ask people to help you. It’s not weakness. Good night, Mr. Winchester. Think about doing something for yourself when you’re done cleaning.” He waves and turns away.

Dean finishes cleaning the bathroom and moves on to his room, dusting and straightening out his dresser. At 10:30, he’s run out of chores he’s willing to do. He changes and gets ready for bed, then runs downstairs and peeks in on Bobby, who’s sleeping. Satisfied, he wanders back into his room, feeling aimless. Lying across his bed, he stares at the ceiling, letting his mind go blank. He struggles to think of something to do for himself, always coming back to just zoning out. Eventually he lets himself do just that. Maybe it’s not what Cas meant, but it feels right. He falls asleep peacefully rather than out of sheer exhaustion, for once.

Friday night, Dean brings home soda and two large pizzas. Walking up the driveway, he starts at the van parked there instead of Cas’ usual, ugly Continental, but when he walks in Cas is there. Must be a rental, he figures. Piece of shit car is probably on the fritz. Dinner is good, even though Bobby is a little quieter than usual. After supper he expects Cas to leave, but Cas takes Bobby into his room to use the commode, so Dean cleans up the few leftovers they had. He looks around to see what else needs to be done and finds…nothing. In fact, the house looks even cleaner than usual, like Cas has been cleaning. Dean frowns. That isn’t part of his job. Dean sorts through his email while he waits to talk to Cas. He’s not mad, he just doesn’t want Cas to do more than necessary. He hears Cas wheeling Bobby out and stands, only to be surprised yet again by Bobby. In shoes. And a coat.

“We’re going for a drive,” Cas announces. “We’ll see you in an hour or so. Here, I brought you something to watch if you want.” Dean looks at the DVD case pressed into his hand: The Guild. “It’s about a bunch of people who play one of those World of Warcraft kind of games,” he explains.

“A MMORPG?”

Cas’ eyes widen as his brows raise. “Charlie was right.”

“About?”

“About you knowing what a MMORPG is.” He chuckles. “Anyway, it’s very good. I think you’ll like it if you decide to watch.” He bundles himself into a leather jacket and a scarf. “Whatever you do, your job is to do something for yourself. We’ll be back.” And just like that, they’re out the door. He watches Cas get Bobby down the ramp and into the van, which is wheelchair accessible. Nice. He wishes he had one of those. It’d be easier than transferring Bobby between his wheelchair and the Impala. They drive off and, for the first time in years, Dean is alone in the house.

He’s alone. He’s alone.

He yells “Woohooohoooooo!” at the top of his lungs because he can.

He runs up and down the stairs and tears through every room because he can.

He closes all the blinds and strips down to his underwear and socks because he can.

He blasts classic rock and plays air guitar because he can.

He hides behind the couch and tells Cas and Bobby to close their eyes because he didn’t realize how fast an hour goes. He ignores his uncle’s laughter.
Bobby and Cas are deep in conversation when he returns, completely dressed and completely embarrassed. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

“Did you have a good time?” Cas asks innocently. Bobby snorts next to him.

“Shut up,” he laughs, pointing to his uncle. “Yeah, I did. Did you?”

“I did.”

“What about you, there, old man? What’d you guys do?”

Bobby tells Dean that they checked out all of his “old haunts” on their outing, and reluctantly admits he had an “okay” time.

“Can you do lunch next Friday?” Cas asks.

Stunned, Dean replies, “Yeah, absolutely.”

Cas offers them both a smile. Bobby twists his mouth in reluctant agreement. Dean has a feeling they talked a lot about this.

Bobby wants to go to sleep early, so Cas gets him to bed while Dean zones out, tapping the DVD set Cas brought in his palm. “Everything alright?” Cas asks. Dean didn’t realize that much time had passed.

“Will you stay and watch this with me?” he blurts.

Cas seems surprised, but after a long pause he says softly, “Sure.”

Dean sets it up while Cas disappears, returning quickly with chips, a tub of French Onion dip, and two ceramic mugs of soda (since all their glasses broke over the years and they never replaced them). He smiles because Cas didn’t even ask. Just like a friend. Dean collapses next to him (because he has the food, and if he can get a little human contact in there he won’t complain) and presses play.

They watch two seasons because the episodes are so short, and it’s awesome. The show is good, the food is good, being with Cas is good, being alone with Cas is good. It feels like they’re just two friends hanging out on a Friday night.

“Sorry about earlier, bein’ in my underwear,” Dean says sheepishly as he removes the DVD from the player. “It’s been a long time since I was alone in the house.”

“I imagine it has been,” Cas responds with a gentle, understanding smile. He pauses, then shares, “When my mother was hospitalized for the first time, I walked around the house nude all weekend. I slept with the door closed because I didn’t have to listen out for her. I watched porn and…well, you probably don’t need to know what I did in almost every room of the house.” Dean laughs and Cas smiles, his face softer, shyer than his usual confidence. “And then she was discharged, so the fun was over.”

Surprised at the wealth of personal information, he sits by Cas and asks softly, “You took care of your mom all by yourself? How old were you?”

“Mmm, that hospitalization I was…14, 15 maybe?”

“Shit, Cas. Where was your dad?”

“Deployed. I didn’t tell anyone I was alone at the house. I’d been taking care of her for several years
by that point without any real break where I could turn off my brain, so I felt like I deserved the time alone. It was good, but really what I probably needed was someone to take care of me rather than me taking care of myself.” Dean watches quietly as Cas drifts away for a moment, then returns. “Well, sorry, that got heavy. You didn’t need to know all that.”

“No, no, it’s fine, Cas. It’s good. I mean, I had no idea.”

He clears his throat and folds his hands. “Yes, well, I don’t usually share all that with people I work for.”

Dean nods. Of course he’s hung up on that. “Hey. It helps me, you know? If it makes you feel any better, I’ve been caring for people most of my life. My mom died when I was a kid and my dad was a wreck after that, so I took care of Sammy and him. Uncle Bobby and Aunt Karen moved to town after she died, so they never knew her. Bobby started his shop and he and Dad became friends after Bobby hired him. We used to go to the shop after school and our sitter would pick us up there. We got to know Bobby and he got to know us. When our babysitter had to move, Karen volunteered to babysit us. From there, they sort of became family, you know?”

“You’re not actually related?”

“No. Family by choice.”

Cas nods and smiles. “Good kind of family to have.”

“Yeah. So I stuck around until Sammy grew up and was gonna go away to college. I figured once he was gone I’d try to do the same thing, or at least see the world or some shit. I had a job with Bobby by then and I told him I wanted to work a couple of years and save up, then I was gonna do my thing. He thought it was great. Dad didn’t think so, but he just wanted me around to clean up his messes, you know? Anyway, just before I was gonna go, Aunt Karen got sick with cancer, so I stuck around longer so that Bobby could be home with her more. My father wasn’t very reliable that way. Alcohol, other shit. She died a couple of years later, when I was 26. Bobby was sick with the MS by then, but it got worse once she died. I stuck around longer to help him until it got better, but it didn’t. And here I am, twelve years later.”

“I’m sorry you had to take all that on. Caregiving is exhausting and can be very isolating. You never had much of a chance to have your own life.”

Dean shrugs half-heartedly. “Yeah, well, in my younger years when Bobby wasn’t so bad off and Dad wasn’t fucking up his life quite so bad, I sowed my wild oats. But not in a long time now.”

Cas gazes at him earnestly. “Well, as competent as you are in taking care of yourself, please find a way to let others take care of you sometimes. Renew your friendships, spend some time outside of here—and not at work, mind you. I can practically see the path worn by your car between here and the shop.”

Dean snickers at Cas’ gentle teasing. “I’m trying.”

“Good.” Cas collects his coat and the DVD and smiles warmly at Dean as he stands. “I should let you rest.”

They put away their snacks, then Dean walks Cas to the door. Working up his courage, Dean reaches out for his arm. “Hey, Cas?”

“Yes?”
“Um, would you please call me Dean from now on? It kinda…I don’t know, it feels weird when you call me Mr. Winchester.”

Cas tilts his head and eyes him with an inscrutable gaze that has Dean curling his toes in anticipation. “Sure, Dean. I can do that.” They smile at each other before Cas opens the door. Dean finally drops his arm, grateful that Cas didn’t seem bothered by it. “Good night, Dean,” he says before closing it behind him.

“Night, Cas,” Dean murmurs, his eyes alighting on the DVD set that Cas left on the side table by the door. He hoped it was on purpose. He hoped he had a friend.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Dean... <3

Next chapter: Foursome, anyone?

Warnings for mentions of illness (cancer), substance abuse (John), hospitalization (Cas’ mother)

Referenced in this chapter:
The Big Bang Theory, CBS
The Guild, available on YouTube. It stars Felicia Day, the actress who plays Charlie on SPN :)}
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

So, this foursome thing... :P

There is a part in here about a more sensitive topic, now that we’re getting to know the characters better, so warnings are in the end notes for those who may need them. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cas drives the large, retrofitted van mindlessly as he thinks back over the last week. He’s getting close. Too close. *Fuck.* There’s always a tightrope he dances on, an art to what he does that gets people to trust him and to ultimately get the care they need, physically and mentally. But sometimes he finds himself slipping off the rope. Most of the time he recovers. He’s uncertain how to recover from this, or if he needs to. Or wants to. *FUCK.*

Convincing Bobby to go out was the culmination of several weeks of seeds planted here and there about “giving Dean a little time alone” and “seeing what’s new in town,” et cetera. He was thrilled when Bobby finally agreed to go out. “Just for an hour,” the ornery man had grumbled. Cas made certain that he didn’t let his happiness show on his face, schooling it to one of casual acceptance. He left after lunch to get the van from home. It was Trudy’s, but neither he nor Charlie had used it since she passed. Charlie was more than happy to let him use it for Bobby and encouraged him to keep it there. Perhaps he will, once he can talk Bobby into it.

On their ride, Bobby looked around him, rapt. He told Cas stories about some of the places they passed, all of his memories many years old now. He didn’t grow up here in Pennsylvania—he and Karen moved here from South Dakota to support her sister after a divorce—but he considered it home “because home was anywhere Karen was.” It was a sweet sentiment from a man who liked to pretend he wasn’t an old softie. Cas thought it must be wonderful to find that kind of love, that sort of security and peace in the mind and heart of another.

On their way home, Cas made sure to pass the Roadhouse.

“Looks pretty good,” Bobby had commented.

“It is. Ellen’s done a terrific job with it.”

“Mmm. Used to go there with Dean’s daddy.”

“Yes, I remember you mentioning that yesterday.”

“Did?”

“Mmmhmm.” Sometimes Bobby’s memory falters. A symptom of the MS more than age, most likely.

“Huh. Well yeah, me and him and Rufus and a couple other guys used to go. Good little spot. Was nice unwindin’ with friends after a long week, you know?”

“Yes, I can imagine. I used to do the same with guys from the base or my coworkers from the
hospitals I worked at. I still sneak in some time occasionally with friends.”

Bobby grunted, then said, “Dean needs some friends.”

Cas nodded. “Yes, it appears that way.”

“You, ah…you did a nice thing, hangin’ around to watch that show with him. I think he needed that. Appreciated it.”

Warmth filled his gut at the memory of spending casual time with Dean. He often felt good knowing that something he did improved someone’s life, helped them in ways that perhaps they hadn’t opened themselves to before, but the warmth contained more than just altruism. There was something personal in there, too, something for him. He pushed that feeling away. “I was happy to do it,” he said.

“He don’t ask much for himself. Never has,” Bobby said quietly. “He’s a good kid. Deserves more than what he’s gotten. Missed out on a lot.”

“Well, Bobby, I’m here to help make sure that he has the time and support he needs to find what he’s been missing.”

Bobby huffed a small laugh. “Yeah, I reckon he’ll find it in short order with you around.”

Cas had no idea what he meant, but Bobby dropped the topic when he saw a doughnut shop he used to frequent. They stopped and Cas ran in and bought a few since Bobby didn’t want to go in. They ate them in the parking lot. He’s pretty sure Bobby nearly cried.

“Why don’t you ever ask Dean to take you out?” Cas asked.

“He does enough.”

Cas rolled his eyes and let the subject drop, but filed his thoughts away for future use.

When they got back to his house, they walked in to the sight of Dean running to hide. He was pretty sure Dean was in his underwear. Bobby laughed aloud, but Cas didn’t want him to feel self-conscious so he pretended he didn’t see anything. He knew what that freedom felt like, and he’d been hoping Dean would tap into it. While Dean was dressing, Cas brought up the topic of lunch at the Roadhouse.

“I don’t need to go out for lunch.”

“Maybe not, but Dean needs to.”

Bobby eyed him suspiciously. “Whaddaya mean?”

“Did you see the way his face lit up when I suggested it last night? He has no social life beyond what happens at work. He’s nearly as isolated as you. It’s not good for him, Bobby. Going to get take-out isn’t the same as sitting in a restaurant with your family. I’ll be there to handle the eating part and whatever care you need. All you two have to do is enjoy each other. Bobby, he needs this.”

Bobby had reluctantly agreed. For his nephew. It was good enough for Cas, and he counted it as a victory.

Then Dean wanted him to stay, to spend time with him and him alone. He knew, right in that moment, that his toes were gripping the tightrope. But Dean looked so hopeful, so vulnerable, and
Bobby’s words about Dean needing a friend rang in his ears. He agreed. Dean was in Cas’ space nearly constantly, touching him with a leg or a foot or the brush of an arm. He doesn’t think Dean realized what he was doing, at least not consciously; the touching was almost like a plant reaching out toward sunlight instinctually. It needed what the sunlight offered. Knowing his own history and the fact that it’s just been Dean and Bobby for some time, Cas assumed perhaps Dean hadn’t been exposed to a lot of touch, at least not recently. Touch is essential for humans; Cas often went out of his way to touch as often as he could (with permission, in the right settings, et cetera). He didn’t stop Dean from touching him.

And then he stepped over the line, sharing what he did about his childhood. He did it to help Dean feel less embarrassed about what he did with his time to himself, but still. He knew better. Then Dean shared more about himself, and the guilt he felt at stepping over the line abated some, since it led to Dean being able to open up. He justified his self-disclosure as his heart filled with sorrow for Dean. He had been caring for people his whole life. Who had cared for him?

He didn’t think about it much when Dean handed him the DVD set. He had already decided to leave it there. He should’ve thought more about the consequences, more about whether this was really something he should encourage, more about whether he’s really doing this for Dean or whether it’s just as much for himself. But he didn’t. He left it there, inviting another night just like the last.

That’s exactly what he’s gotten… every night this week. He’s stayed and gotten Bobby to bed, giving Dean some time to himself, and then he’s stuck around for an hour or so with Dean afterward. They’ve watched TV, they’ve ignored the TV in favor of talking, and once they played cards. Dean talked about poker nights they used to have at the house. Cas longed to give him that again, longed to give him more. Clutching to the tightrope. And now he’s on his way to his shift at Bobby’s, to pick the man up and bring him to lunch at the Roadhouse and to the shop. It’s for Bobby, Cas reminds himself. Yes, but it’s for Dean, too. Because you care. But do you care too much?

“No,” he says aloud as he pulls into the driveway. He takes a deep breath and pulls his coat around him a little tighter.

“You look good, but where’s your ball gown?” Cas jokes as he steps inside the familiar home of his client. Bobby is dressed in elastic-waist casual pants and a plaid short-sleeved shirt topped with a maroon zippered sweater.

“No fine cuisine, no ball gown,” Bobby snarks in return. Cas loves it.

“Fine, fine. Does that mean I’ll get a second date?”

“We’ll see how the first one goes. Don’t get all handsy now.”

“I would never. I’m a gentleman. Now, do you need anything before we go?”

He takes Bobby into the bedroom and assists him with the commode, then helps him brush his teeth. He rolls him out (with some difficulty) and to the van.

“Your ramp is a little too steep,” Cas tells Bobby. “Can I fix that for you?”

“You handy?”

“Handy enough.”

“Go for it.”

Making a mental note to do that next week, he runs back and locks the door, then climbs into the van
and takes Bobby to the “land of the living,” as Bobby calls it. When they arrive, he turns to make a joke that dies on his lips. Bobby looks terrified.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Cas urges gently. Bobby says nothing, so Cas climbs into the back to be next to him. “Are you nervous about going in?”

Bobby frowns and turns away.

“Are you nervous about people looking at you? About what Ellen will think?” Cas draws in a breath. “Do you think you’ll be an embarrassment to Dean?”

Bobby says nothing, but the thick swallow and clenched jaw say it for him.

“Let me tell you something, Bobby. He loves you. And you love him. If the situation was reversed, you wouldn’t give a shit about what anyone else thinks and you sure as hell wouldn’t be embarrassed by him. I get the feeling that Dean’s the same way.”

“Yeah,” Bobby rumbles, “but it’s still embarrassin’. For both of us.”

“I know you think so, but it’s also important. For both of you.”

“Yeah, I know.” He sighs. “His daddy was embarrassed of me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well, he was kind of an asshole sometimes. Carried on like a damn fool sometimes too, when he was drinkin’ or druggin’. Talk about embarrassing.”

“I had to learn at an early age that other people’s behavior is not a reflection on me. Having a parent who regularly exhibited embarrassing behavior helped me develop a very high tolerance.”

Bobby turns an assessing gaze to Cas. “Your mama on the sauce, too?”

“Sometimes. And sometimes she thought that the UPS driver was an agent trailing her every move and sometimes she screamed at random people at the grocery store to fuck the alien poison out of her.” Cas clears his throat and gazes at his hands.

Soft but determined, Bobby says, “Let’s get inside, son.” Cas is grateful for it all—the tone, kind but unpitying; the small endearment; the chance to save face even if he just said he’s not easily embarrassed. He smiles and rolls Bobby into the Roadhouse.

“Bobby Singer, as I live and breathe,” Ellen shouts across the room. She races to them and throws her arms around him. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Home, mostly,” he answers without a touch of sarcasm.

“Well, you’ve been missing out. Come on in here, we need to catch up!”

Ellen leads them to a table, where she quickly slides a chair to the side to make room for the wheelchair. Cas inserts Bobby into the space and leaves him to Ellen’s mercies as he scans the room to wait for Dean. A minute later, Dean walks in and glances around the room. His face breaks into a huge grin when he sees Cas, a grin he’s been seeing more and more on the man. He feels it tug at his resolve.

“Hey, Cas,” he smiles as he slides into the seat next to him, his arm bumping Cas’. He glances at his uncle, who’s still listening to Ellen. “I admit I thought I’d get a text canceling this whole thing,” he
“I’m glad I didn’t have to send that.”

“Me too, Cas.” His brilliant smile turns softer, more personal. Cas’ grip on the tightrope is precarious at best.

Ellen gives them menus and lets them peruse, then comes back a few minutes later for their orders—burgers, fries, and sodas for all. Bobby is turning his head this way and that, checking out the place, and Dean is doing the same, though his eyes tend to come back to rest on Cas. Cas twists his mouth into a smile, feeling much more self-conscious than usual. He needs to do something. “So, how’s work today?” he asks Dean. That gets the conversation going, and Cas begins to feel more settled… until they are interrupted.

“Hey, hey,” a very familiar voice pipes up. Jo is looking down at them, beaming. Cas is instantly suspicious.

“I didn’t think you were working today,” he says, squinting.

“Helping mom with inventory,” she shrugs. It’s too casual, and his hunch that this is a setup is confirmed when Charlie comes breezing through the door. “Oh, hey…”

“Stop it, both of you,” Cas grumbles. This is not what he wanted for either Bobby or Dean. Jo snickers behind her hand.

“Hey, Deanie Beanie!” Charlie chirps with a wave. “Is this your uncle?”

“Hey, Charlie,” Dean responds. His smile is stilted, much less relaxed than before. Cas feels him shift away a bit. “Yeah, this is Bobby. Bobby, this is Charlie and, uh…”

“Jo. I’m Ellen’s daughter. Nice to meet both of you,” she says with a flap of her hand.

“I’m Charlie! It’s great to meet you!” she says to Bobby, who’s immediately taken in by her sheer exuberance. For all of her faults (meddling, mostly), Charlie is a beautiful person, always seeing the best in others. She rests her hand on his shoulder. “Tell me, has my man Cas gotten the stick out of his ass yet?” she asks him, leaning in confidentially.

“Mostly, though I think there’s still a fragment lodged in there,” Bobby gruffs affectionately, sending Charlie into shrieks of laughter, Jo right behind her. Bobby laughs along, seeming to feel more at ease. Cas smiles, used to their razzing, and looks at Dean, who is smiling tight-lipped. He looks uncomfortable, and Cas feels awful.

“I’m so sorry, Dean,” Cas whispers. He lays a hand on his arm. “I had no idea they’d be here. I’ll move them along. They can be a little much sometimes.” Dean huffs and shakes his head dismissively, shifting his arm out of Cas’ touch. Cas takes the I want my space message and back off.

“Ladies…” Cas begins, but stops and frowns when he sees them seated. “What are you doing?”

“Bobby invited us to sit with you! Isn’t that sweet? He said he thought we’d get along famously with Dean! Of course, I know that we would because he’s such a sweetie and a cutie patootie to boot!”

“Charlie…”

“So, Dean, there are things we must discuss. First: Star Wars or Star Trek?”
Dean seems to collect himself and starts talking, so Cas leaves things alone for now. Bobby calls his name and says in his ear, “Would be good for him to be friends with all’a yas, right?”

“Uh, well…” he says before he hears Dean laugh. Turning his head, Charlie is miming something that looks a lot like her impression of Yoda. He smiles. “I suppose friends like Charlie and Jo are good to have. They’re great people.”

Bobby looks like he’s going to say something else when the food arrives. The table quiets, but not for long (never for long when Charlie’s around).

“Ooh, you guys! We need to invite Dean over for Sunday Funday! Make it a foursome!”

Dean starts choking on his burger. “What?” he wheezes. Cas puts down Bobby’s burger, ignoring the wide eyes Cas assumes are out of concern for his nephew, in order to make sure Dean is okay. He rubs his back as Dean takes a sip of water. When he seems okay, Cas returns his attention to Bobby and hopes the conversation is dropped. It seems to make Dean uneasy.

“Yeah, that’d be cool,” Jo agrees, picking it right back up.

“We can make a day of it! Buns and guns in the morning, break for lunch, and then bang out some more action in the afternoon! What do you think, Dean?”

“Uh…that’s not something I’ve ever done.” He rubs his hands on his jeans and Cas notices sweat breaking out above his lip. Cas wonders if Dean is feeling overwhelmed or pressured. It’s been a long time since he’s been around new people. Plus, Cas is his employee. As friendly as he’s been and as much as he needs some friends, Dean might not be comfortable with this. He’s not entirely sure he’s comfortable with this. Keeping the employer/employee line drawn between them will be much tougher the more time they spend together.

“Dean, you certainly don’t have to,” Cas assures him.

“Of course not,” Charlie chimes, “but it would be so fun! It’s always me and Jo ganging up on Cas! I mean that’s fun for us, obviously, but I’m sure he’d appreciate the extra hand, you know?”

“Uh, heh… uh, yeah,” Dean stammers.

“He barely knows you two, give him a chance to get used to you,” Cas scolds Charlie before saying, “I’m sorry, Dean, really. Don’t feel any pressure to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Ruffling his hair, he says, “It’s, um… I’m flattered, but… I mean with you I… um, it’s just that I, uh, I stay home with Bobby on the weekends…”

“No problem! We could do it at your place!” Charlie squeals. “He can watch and offer tips!”

“Oh my God,” Dean mutters, dropping his head into his hands.

“That’s probably a little more than I wanna know about any of ya,” Bobby declares.

Cas places a comforting hand on Dean’s shoulder, feeling horrible that his friends have overwhelmed the man who hasn’t had this much attention directed at him in some time. “Charlie, please stop insisting that Dean spend time with us. Perhaps if he gets to know you better, he might be more open to playing video games with us some Sunday, but for now, please drop it.”

“Fine,” she grumbles as Dean says lifts his head and says, “Video games?”
“Yeah, video games. You know, with laser guns and cars and Madden and shit?” Jo says.

“Video games. Oh God,” Dean mumbles. His face is the most brilliant shade of red Cas has ever seen. “I thought you were…oh God. I’m sorry.”

To Cas’ left, Bobby starts howling with laughter, while Cas and the ladies remain clueless until Jo says, “Oh fuck, did you think a foursome foursome?”

Charlie immediately bursts into raucous laughter while Jo titters. Cas does his best to remain straight-faced, but fails when Dean peeks at him and grimaces. He snorts loudly before covering his mouth. “I’m sorry, Dean,” he says, quickly composing himself. “I know how your mind went there with the word, I just… the whole idea of having sex with them is so ludicrous my mind can’t process it.”

“God, no, that’s so gross for so many reasons!” Charlie adds.

Poor Dean looks more confused than ever. “Wait, aren’t you guys… oh God, I’m wrong about that too. You guys aren’t married.”

Bobby and the ladies start a fresh round of laughter while Cas stammers, “Why…how did you ever think… I don’t—”

“I overheard them call you their husband once. At the bakery.”

“I told you that would bite us in the ass someday!” Cas shouts to Charlie, heedless of the others in the bar. He throws a wadded-up napkin at her.

“You thought a super gay dude was in a polyamorous relationship with a super gay gal and a bi demi gal?” Jo asks with a laugh. “Oh, sweetie.”

“I didn’t know he was gay! I didn’t know any of you were… any of that!”

“Aww, poor Deanie Beanie, I’m sorry!” Charlie, ever sweet, says to Dean. “No wonder you were all freaked out! No, Jo and I are dating, and Cas is all by his lonesome, so we thought you could be his plus one!”

Cas feels a flare of self-consciousness at the poke at his single status, then anger at the fact that Charlie is apparently trying to hook him up with Dean. “Now wait, Charlie, we discussed this—”

“He has, like, ten women who call him hubby,” Jo says to Dean over Cas. “But he needs a hubby of his own, you know what I mean?” She wiggles her brows.

“Jo, that—”

“I gotcha,” Dean laughs.

“There’s nothing to ‘get’—”

“I feel like a fucking idiot,” Dean continues, talking over Cas, who throws up his hands. Is no one listening to me? “I was trying to figure out how to tell you all that I’m gay and I’m not into that other stuff without insulting your marriage and your gender and orientation and all…shit. Well, I feel a hell of a lot better now, so yeah, if Bobby’s cool with it and you ladies want to play video games and not sex games, come on over on Sunday.”

“I notice you left Cas out of that reference to sex games,” Charlie murmurs under her breath before quickly adding “Yay! I’m so excited!” She purposely avoids meeting Cas’ eyes, he’s certain,
because he knows that she knows that he heard her. “Whaddaya say, big guy?”

“I say this is the most entertaining lunch I’ve had in years,” Bobby smiles. “Yeah, come on over on Sunday.”

“Sunday Funday at Bobby’s and Dean’s! Woohoo!” Charlie slaps Bobby’s shoulder, then Jo’s and Dean’s hands, but stops when she gets to Cas—probably because of the murderous look he’s giving her.

“Sleep with one eye open,” he warns her.

“What? You could use a partner! For the games!” she says, her voice innocent and her eyes anything but.

“Charlie, stop insinuating things. It’s embarrassing. I work for him!”

“I think I win the embarrassment contest, Cas,” Dean says, grasping his shoulder. “We’re all just people here right now, so get the stick out of your ass, will ya?”

“Hey, fuck you,” he replies automatically, as he does with friends. Dean laughs, bright and beautiful, and Cas does, too.

He feels the tightrope slip away as he lets go, the pull of Dean too great to resist.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for:
- Mentions of alcohol and drug abuse (John, Cas’ mother)
- Mentions of mental illness (delusions)(Cas’ mother)
- Secondhand embarrassment (related to the “foursome”)

Next chapter: Sunday Funday!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sunday Funday! (And more!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dean is still thinking about lunch on his way back to the garage. *Cas isn’t married. Cas is gay. Cas’ friends are trying to hook us up.* But wait, he doesn’t care about that. He’s trying to be friends with the guy. *That’s when you thought he was married.* That makes him pause. Now that he knows that, does it change things? The guy still ticks him off sometimes, but in more of a way that leaves him scowling with reluctant mirth rather than seething with misplaced rage. Cas has strong beliefs about how best to help those around him, and sometimes those ideas clash with Dean’s beliefs about sacrificing everything for others and taking nothing for himself. Cas doesn’t back down, either, unlike others in his life have—his father, his brother, friends. Even Bobby has backed off, because there wasn’t much he could do. Or rather, he had backed off. Now he’s trying to get Dean to put himself first once in a while. Damn Cas and his influence. Damn Cas and his heat resistance, standing tall in the face of Dean’s fiery anger. Damn Cas for making Dean melt.

Okay, yup, maybe he’s a little confused about the friendship thing. Damn Cas for being a pushy, attractive bastard.

He’ll deal with that later. Right now his uncle is coming back to the shop for the first time in years, and he wants to make it as comfortable as possible for him. Cas said he’d follow Bobby’s lead as to whether to hang around or take off for a while. He arrives, Cas parking the van next to him.

“Let me show you how to work this,” Cas says, calling him over. He shows him how to work the controls of the lift and how to secure and unsecure the chair. “Now you’ll be able to go out if you’d like,” he finishes.

“Uh, well, it’s not our van,” Dean says.

“Charlie said you can borrow it for a while. I’ll leave it with you guys on Sunday and catch a ride home with her.”

“That’s really fucking generous of her.”

“She’s a great person. You’ll like her once you get to know her.”

“Yeah,” Dean agrees quietly. He’s been kind of aloof with her lately. He needs to apologize to her for that.

“Well, Bobby would like to go in with you, so I’m just going to go to the shop and hang out there. Text me when you’re done.”

“Will do.” Dean gives him a lazy salute, which he returns with a sharp one before doing an about-face and striding to the now-closed coffee shop. Show-off.

Dean rolls Bobby inside, assisted by Garth, who holds the door open. A chorus of cheers rings out when they clear the threshold.
“Bobby, you old son of a bitch!” Rufus, one of his longtime friends, greets him. Rufus just got back from medical leave and is still on light duty, manning the reception desk. Dean thinks this visit will do both of them some good. Bobby’s greeted warmly by Garth and Benny, the only other two who were working there when he was still coming around, before his father basically told him not to come back. Asshole. The other guys, newer but having heard all the stories, are welcoming. Dean takes him around the waiting area (but not into his office, because the wheelchair won’t fit, and there’s a step besides) and the work bays (liability be damned), then shows him the Camaro.

“A beaut,” Bobby murmurs as he looks her over.

“She is,” Dean agrees, roving over the frame.

“You do damn fine work, son.”

He’s not even Bobby’s flesh and blood and the guy is still more loving than his own father. The corner of Dean’s mouth quirks into a smile. “Thanks, Bobby.”

They stand and watch the guys work for a while. Every so often, Benny will ask Bobby’s opinion or Garth will call him over to explain something he did, usually something that Bobby taught him. The light in Bobby’s eyes is priceless, and Dean wishes he’d brought him around sooner. When it looks like Bobby’s starting to droop a bit, Dean brings him back into the waiting room. Rufus wanders to his side and insults him, and soon they’re bickering like the old married couple Dean always teased them about being. Dean ducks into his office to finish up his Friday work and prep for the next week. Peeking out his window to the waiting area, he sees Bobby and Rufus in a heated discussion about God-knows-what. He snaps a picture and sends it to Cas.

To Cas 2:48pm: [1 photo] You’ve brought life back into an old man.

To Dean 2:50pm: That makes me very happy.

He hesitates, then says fuck it and sends:

To Cas 2:55pm: You’ve brought some life back to me, too.

To Dean 2:56pm: That makes me very happy, too.

They don’t say anything about their exchange when Cas comes to take Bobby home, nor when he gets home that night and they hang out to watch a hockey game (Cas cheers against the Penguins because of “rivalries” and maybe to piss Bobby off), but the air is changing between them. Dean feels it. He wonders if Cas does, too.

On Sunday morning, Dean is running around the house like a madman. “Alright, so we have snacks for later, lunch stuff, drinks… damn, I didn’t even think about alcohol, do you think I should get some?” Dean asks frantically.

“Doubt it’ll matter,” Bobby answers. He pauses, then adds, “You’re gettin’ awfully flustered for someone playin’ video games all day.”

“Just want things to go well,” Dean shrugs, feeling self-conscious.

“They’ll go fine, son,” he says in an uncharacteristically soft manner. “Really. I think Charlie likes everyone, and that Jo is just like her mama—heart of gold once she decides she likes ya.”

“Yeah.”
“Or are you worried ‘bout impressin’ Cas?” he asks with an arched brow.

“I’m not—no!”

“Alright, if you say so.”

Dean ignores the obvious doubt in Bobby’s voice and finishes vacuuming in time for the doorbell to ring. He opens the door to Charlie and Jo… wearing pajamas.

“Why’re you all dressed up?” Charlie asks, scanning his nice jeans and fitted sweater. “It’s Sunday Funday! That’s pajama day!”

“Uh… I dunno. I try to make an effort when I have guests over?”

“We’re not ‘guests,’” Jo snarks, “we’re just people coming to take over your house and raid your fridge.”

“You know, friends,” Charlie smiles as they walk in.

Dean breaks into a goofy grin. Friends. Such a simple thing. Something he’ll never take for granted. He turns to invite Cas in, who’s still standing outside. He’s dressed in wind pants and a sweatshirt.

“That what you wear to bed, Cas?”

He looks down at his clothes and shrugs. “I sleep nude,” Cas answers.

Dean involuntarily envisions a naked Cas and says, “Oh.”

“And we already agreed it’s not that kind of party,” he adds, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

“Yeah, we ain’t quite reached that level of casual,” Dean jokes before realizing Cas still hasn’t come in. He moves aside to let Cas pass by.

“Just wait, though,” Charlie grins. Apparently she’d heard their exchange. Dean’s eyes widen as she continues, “Cas loves hanging out in his ‘pajamas’ for Sunday Funday. His birthday suit is his best suit.”

“Charlie! That was one time! And you ambushed me!”

“One time… you’ve actually seen him naked?”

“I am his wife,” she laughs, twirling away. “And I’ve seen him naked more than once!”

Cas covers his face. “I overslept and they came into my room and ripped the covers off me,” he explains.

“Well, that explains one time,” Dean says, his mouth pursed in amusement. He folds his arms and taps his feet, waiting for more. Cas sighs.

“Once over the summer we were taking a late night drive and we stopped at a lake. We didn’t have any swimwear.” He shrugs. “Luckily we weren’t caught. The other time we were pranking each other and she stole everything out of the bathroom while I showered. We are… very strange together.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Charlie calls from the kitchen. “Stop gabbing and set up the PS4, Cas! I’m getting plates and napkins for the sticky buns! Bobby, where are your napkins?”
“And for crying out loud, don’t you guys have actual glasses?” Jo shouts. “I’m not Martha Stewart, but even I know a collection of mugs and water bottles is tacky, for fuck’s sake. Bachelors, jeez.”

“And Dean, go change into pjs while Cas sets up the game! Go, go!”

Cas side-eyes Dean and says, “You may come to regret inviting us over.”

Dean already knows he won’t.

They spend the morning eating caramel pecan sticky buns and playing Star Wars Battlefront II (thus the “buns and guns” comment from Charlie on Friday). For lunch, Dean and Cas make paninis with a panini press that Sam gave Dean one Christmas even though he’d never eaten a panini in his life. He never thought he’d use it. Cas goes for his usual seat to help Bobby eat (Dean’s tried not to use the word “feed” since Cas admonished him for it recently, saying it was infantile) and Dean shoos him out of the way.

“You’re not working today,” Dean murmurs.

“I know, but I’m trying to be of assistance.”

“Well, don’t. Just”—be my friend—“hang out today, okay?”

Cas backs off, his eyes softer than before. Dean’s not sure whether it’s a look of pity or gratitude. “Okay,” he says with a tiny smile. Gratitude. Dean smiles back.

In the afternoon, they switch to NBA 2K18 and Madden 18. Jo swears and is a bit of a sore loser, but Dean suspects she plays it up to get her consolation kisses from Charlie. Charlie is an expert player. She kicks Dean’s ass easily. Cas is great on the shooter game, less so on the sports games. “We left Halo at home on purpose,” Charlie says. “Sharpshooter over here kills us every time.” She nudges Cas with her elbow. They’re very close and very physically affectionate, Dean notices, but now he sees it through a new lens. He wonders if Cas is just a physically affectionate person with his friends. He wonders if they’ll ever be those kind of friends. Maybe they could be. He never backs away when Dean accidentally (or not) comes into contact with him.

They decide to pack it in around 4:00. Cas disconnects the game system while Dean and Jo clean up and Charlie chats with Bobby. Dean had worried that maybe Bobby would be put out by having people over—that was always more Aunt Karen’s thing—but Bobby seemed pretty content to have everyone there.

“Thank you for having us over!” Charlie squeals. “We had so much fun!”

“What she said,” Jo smiles, wrapping an arm around her girlfriend’s waist.

“I’m leaving the van here,” Cas reminds them. He hangs the keys on a hook near the door. “Do the two of you mind if I plan to fix up the ramp next Saturday? It won’t take long, I don’t think. I’ll pick up the materials this week.”

“That’s fine,” Bobby says, and Dean agrees even though it’s the first he hears of this. Cas has mentioned the ramp is too steep. His father had made it and Dean didn’t want to give him shit for it when he was trying to be helpful, but it really does need to be safer. And if Cas wants to come over on a Saturday, that’s cool. Maybe he’ll want to hang out after.

“Ooh, you guys should come over for Thanksgiving! Unless you have other plans?”

Thanksgiving is in two weeks, and their plans are the same as usual: Dean and Bobby eating a small
dinner of Dean’s making at home. Dad showing up is a crapshoot. Sam won’t be there. Sometimes Sam comes out to visit after Christmas, though it’s been a couple of years. Dean’s encouraged him to spend his holidays with his wife Amelia’s family, and Bobby’s done the same. He knows it’s more avoidance bullshit on both their parts, but it’s not like Sam’s ever fought him on it. He sighs. “No plans, really, but we’re big guys. Don’t wanna squeeze you out of your space,” he tells Charlie, wanting to be included but also wanting to give anyone who might object a graceful way out.

“There’s plenty of room!” she insists with a roll of her eyes. “It’s just gonna be the three of us and Jo’s mom. You should come! The more the merrier! The house is laid out perfectly for Bobby’s chair, so no worries there, and Cas makes amazing stuffing and gravy for the turkey.”

“Oh yeah, you should see how Cas stuffs a hole and soaks it with his gravy.” Jo utters the obvious sexual innuendo with an air of innocence, but Cas is clearly not fooled. He shoves her shoulder and growls “Stop” with wide eyes and clenched teeth. She snickers at him and mutters “You would’ve said it yourself at home, you dirty bastard” as she messes his hair with her fingers. They’re like siblings. Seeing them like this, Dean isn’t sure why he ever thought they could be married.

“Why don’t we let them talk about it and we’ll get out of their hair,” Cas says. “I’m sure we’ve traumatized them enough for one day.” They say their goodbyes as Cas ushers them out the door. Dean watches them through the window; the women are hanging on him and pawing at his face and hair as he tries to shake them off and maintain his frown. It doesn’t work well because he laughs and Dean hears him yell “I’m divorcing you!” when they tickle him. The women make the serious soldier and medical professional looser, warmer. Dean wants that for himself. Whether he means he wants those kind of friends that make him feel carefree or whether he wants Cas to be looser and warmer with him, he’s not sure. Maybe both.

“So, Thanksgiving. We doin’ this or what?” Bobby asks.

Dean turns away from the window. “You want to?”

Bobby tilts his head back and forth in what Dean’s come to interpret as a shrug. “Might be nice to have a bunch of people like we used to.”

“Yeah,” Dean smiles. Cautiously, he decides to bring up the subject of Aunt Karen. “Aunt Karen loved a crowd.”

“That she did,” he smiles wistfully. “She’d have my hide for doin’ what I done.”

Dean furrows his brows. “What’s that?”

“Keepin’ myself away from people. She’s the one who used to drag me all over the place and make me socialize. Been kind of hidin’ from people.”

Shrugging, Dean says, “We both have. She’d be proud of us now, huh?”

“Hell yeah. Hey, maybe you can pick up some proper glasses when you’re out sometime, huh?”

“Maybe we can go out together and get ‘em,” Dean says, taking a chance. “We have the van now.”

Bobby grunts. “Maybe.”

Dean takes that as a win.

The week goes well, Cas staying for supper and to get Bobby to bed every night and then hanging out after. On Saturday, Cas comes over in the morning, as promised. Dean offers to help and Cas
accepts, so he sets up an audiobook for Bobby and meets Cas in the one-car garage that they use for storing everything except a vehicle. They work peacefully together, not saying a lot as they measure and cut but not really needing to.

“We were thinking it would be cool to come over for Thanksgiving if it’s cool with you,” Dean says, breaking the quiet.

“Sounds good,” Cas replies. He closes one eye as he peers at a piece of wood before screwing it in place.

“Are you okay with that?”

“Sure, why wouldn’t I be?”

“I dunno, I just…I mean, I don’t want to force the issue just because Charlie’s…enthusiastic.”

Cas looks up and grins. “Yes, that is a good word to describe her. But no, it’s fine.” He goes back to screwing the boards to the base.

“Oh, but I’m kinda shootin’ for more than ‘fine,’ you know? I…” He’s not sure if he wants to say what he’s thinking. He hates being needy. “I just wanna know that you want us there, not that it’s some sort of obligation.”

Cas looks up again and sets the cordless drill down. His sleeves are pushed up to his elbows, revealing toned forearms that catch Dean’s attention. “You want to know if we’re friends.”

Way to cut through the bullshit. He swallows and shifts on his feet, uneasy. “Yeah,” he murmurs.

“We…shouldn’t be. Boundaries and all.”

“Great job sticking to that with Charlie,” he blurts, feeling hurt. He stares at the dirty laces on his shoes until Cas clears his throat.

“Yes, well, I’ve never been great at following the rules.”

Dean meets Cas’ eyes hopefully. “Kinda got that feeling about you.”

“Gotten me into trouble sometimes.”

“You like a little trouble?”

Cas rubs at his neck, then ruffles his hair. His smile grows warm and almost shy. Dean’s stomach does a strange flip he’s never quite felt before. “Sometimes.” He licks his lips and takes a breath. “Do you want to be friends, Dean?”

“Yes, Cas, I do. Do you?”

Cas nods his head slowly, almost rhythmically, like he’s made a decision. “Yes. I do.”

Chapter End Notes

Aww! They’re friends!
Next chapter: Food, friends, family, fights, feels...a typical Thanksgiving.
“No innuendos, no insinuations, no overt or covert suggestions, nothing,” Cas warns two of his closest friends.

“Who, us?” Jo asks, batting the lashes of her brown doe eyes.

“Yes, you. This is Thanksgiving, not… something else, so keep your comments to yourselves.” It’s a weak warning and he knows it.

“Flustered much, Mr. Tough Guy?”

“No, just… I never know what’s going to come out of your mouths, and I don’t want to worry about that now, okay? For fuck’s sake, I’m already bending the boundaries by being friends with him and inviting them here and… I can’t think about it right now.”

“Wait ’til you and Dean start dating,” Charlie, who’s been listening while she fills pie crusts, interjects.

“See, that’s the shit that can’t happen. You have to stop that kind of talk. Being friends is one thing, but being lovers would be something else entirely. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” At the women’s nods, he rolls his head to ease the tension building there. “One, he is my employer. Two, he is the pseudo-relative of my client/employer.”

“Neither of those reasons were that you’re not attracted to him,” Jo notes.

“It doesn’t matter whether I am or not. It’s not a good idea.”

“He totally is,” Charlie smirks to Jo.

“Stop it,” he scowls. “Ellen, control your daughter and her girlfriend,” Cas pleads when Jo’s mother enters the kitchen, bags in hand.

“This about you and Bobby’s nephew? You should hit that,” she says. The younger women howl and slap Ellen’s hand.

“I’m in a den of devils,” Cas mutters.

Cas is peeling potatoes when the doorbell rings. A few minutes later, Dean is in the kitchen, washing his hands at the sink. The nice jeans and fitted sweater have made a reappearance, and Cas’ eyes scan him without permission. He fixes his focus on the peelings falling into the trash can.
“You’re our guest,” Cas reminds him when Dean grabs a potato and searches drawers. “Go ahead and relax in the living room. I’ll grab you a drink.”

“Nah, that’s no fun. Besides, I’m a friend, not a guest.” Dean bumps him with his hip to move him over so he can reach the drawer he hasn’t searched yet, declaring his victory when he pulls out a paring knife. Cas smiles to himself as they peel together in a comfortable silence.

“Oh, hey you,” Dean says a few minutes later, looking down at Charlie’s cat, Midge. He finishes peeling and dries his hands. “Demanding, huh?” he says when the cat meows and headbutts him relentlessly until he pets her.

Cas senses an opportunity to plant more seeds. “Midge unapologetically asks for what she needs until her needs are met,” he smiles. “Whether it’s affection, space, food, assistance, or whatever. Animals are good at that sort of thing. People are less so.”

Dean grunts. “Never thought of it that way. Maybe that’s why animals are so happy.”

“Maybe. It’s a good life lesson that I’ve tried to live by, anyway. Had to learn it the hard way, but I suppose most lessons are hard.” He shrugs, trying to make it look casual.

“Okay, there, Socrates,” Dean teases with a nudge of his elbow. “So what’s next?” Joke, body contact, change the subject. Dean is uncomfortable. Good.

“Stuffing,” Cas says, allowing Dean the out.

“Then your special gravy I’ve heard about?” Dean asks with a wink, and now Cas is uncomfortable. Touché.

Jo runs up to Dean and high-fives him.

“Get out,” Cas scowls with a reluctant smile.

A while later, Charlie calls everyone to the table. Dinner is loud and boisterous, which is perfect for his dear friend. She has needed the liveliness this sort of gathering has brought into her home. This is Charlie’s first Thanksgiving without her mom, though last year’s holiday wasn’t much of one. At that time, Trudy was recovering from another bout of pneumonia—her last one, as it turned out. She died several weeks later from congestive heart failure. He knows Charlie’s trying to stay focused on the present, on all the good in her life, and he knows she did a lot of grieving before her mom even passed, and then plenty afterward as well. But holidays are hard times, Cas knows, both personally and from the thousands of patients and their families he’s worked with over the years. She crawled into his bed in the wee hours this morning, shaking with grief. He’d anticipated her and dressed for bed last night instead of opting for his usual nudity, and he held her and stroked her hair until the tears dried on both of their faces. He’s happy to see her smiling now, joking around with Dean, Bobby, and Ellen, and holding Jo’s hand. Dean, too, is smiling, almost glowing with it. His handsome face, often creased with stress, is smooth and childlike today. Cas isn’t sure whether it’s being with friends, or the feeling of family, or just not being alone, but Dean’s entire demeanor is lighter, more relaxed than usual. Even helping Bobby with his meal doesn’t seem to faze him; it is a task that is integrated into the flow of things rather than an act of isolation, where it’s him and Bobby and no one else in their little bubble. It’s a joy to see. Bobby’s eyes are animated, the emotional effects of his illness forgotten or at least pushed aside in favor of the healing power of togetherness. Ellen and Jo, too, seem happy today, their sometimes tempestuous relationship at peace.

As for himself, well… there’s an almost-forgotten sort of feeling swirling in his chest, a feeling of ease and belonging. He doesn’t remember much about his early years, but he seems to think there were a couple of Thanksgivings he felt like this, before everything fell apart. One year, maybe around age five or so, the base had a Thanksgiving dinner for anyone who wanted to join in. He
remembers sitting with his friend Nate and his family, his own mother and father flanking him. There were games for the kids and every dessert imaginable. Everyone was in good spirits, his father hadn’t gone on endless deployments yet, and his mother wasn’t ill yet, at least not that he knew of. That was a good one—one of the last good ones with the three of them together, before Elliot Novak turned on them. Then there was the first one with Missouri, when he was thirteen. That Thanksgiving, his mother was well into an active-phase psychosis, and he’d spent the day trying to convince her that he wasn’t an “agent of the Dark Forces” and keeping her from killing herself. When she finally managed to fall asleep on booze and sleeping pills, Cas sat on the stoop of their apartment and cried. He’d never felt so alone and hopeless. Their new neighbor Missouri, a kind and spunky nurse, came home from her shift at the hospital close to midnight and sat next to him on the stoop, pulling him into a hug until his tears stopped. She didn’t even know him, but instead of asking questions, she invited him in for miniature sandwiches made with turkey, stuffing, potatoes, cranberry sauce, and leftover rolls that they dunked in gravy. They sat in her cozy living room watching TV and she fed him until he was sated, then sent him home with more food for the next couple of days. It was the start of a friendship that lasted well into Cas’ adulthood. She was his inspiration and his shoulder to cry on, and she helped keep him together after his mother’s death when he was eighteen. He was devastated when Missouri died a few years ago, as devastated as he was when his mother died—more, probably. His mother’s passing had been a sort of relief, in a horrible way. Missouri’s passing did not bring relief. It brought fear, loneliness, and deep sorrow. He thinks of her now and offers his thanks for all she did for him. She is one of the reasons he managed to become the person he is today, despite everything. She gave him that sense of being deeply cared for, of family. He feels that sense of family now, a feeling he hasn’t felt quite this strongly in some time. He misses her.

“That’s a damn good idea,” Dean says, nudging his chin toward Cas’ hands. He hadn’t noticed that he made himself a sandwich with his roll. He watches as Dean does the same. Dean, whose own life was so disrupted, whose own sense of self was lost somewhere along the way as he was pulled by responsibility in every direction but his own, who just wants friends and a family. Dean, who Cas is growing fonder of every day. Cas stands and pulls out a bowl, then pours gravy into it as Dean watches.

“They’re best when you dunk them in gravy,” he smiles as he dips his into the bowl.

“Dude, yes,” Dean grins. He dunks and swirls his sandwich, then taps it against Cas’ in a sort of toast. “To friends,” he says.

“To friends,” he agrees, tapping Dean’s sandwich in return.

When they’re done dessert and are watching football, Jo and Bobby arguing with each other while Ellen and Charlie talk restaurant business, Dean disappears. Cas finds him a few minutes later, sitting outside in the front just as Cas did one Thanksgiving so many years ago. And just like Missouri did, Cas sits next to him.

“Holidays aren’t all they’re cracked up to be sometimes,” Dean comments. Cas frowns. He thought Dean was having a good time, but maybe not. Still, he can’t disagree.

“True.”

“This is the first one in a long, long time that’s felt like it’s supposed to. How sad is that? I’m not even with anyone who’s my blood and it’s one of the best ones I’ve ever had.”

Cas huffs. “Blood isn’t all it’s cracked up to be sometimes, either.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Dean agrees with a chuckle. “You don’t really see your family, huh? I mean, I know your parents aren’t around and you don’t have any siblings, but what about other family?”
Cas had told Dean that Marjorie Novak was dead and Elliot Novak might as well be, but never bothered to talk about the rest of his family. There wasn’t much to say. “I’m not close to any of my extended family. We didn’t live near any of them and we moved around a lot. I was an Army brat.”

“Sorry, man. That sucks.” Cas shrugs. He doesn’t think about it a lot anymore. “Who did you spend holidays with?”

“Missouri, a neighbor of mine when I was a teenager. Sometimes with friends. Sometimes I just worked and ignored the holidays altogether.”

“I’ve felt like doing that sometimes. A lot, actually. But I wanna make it nice for Bobby. If I don’t, who will, you know?”

“What about your brother?” Cas asks. His brother is a touchy topic. As much as Dean’s talked about his brother Sam, he’s avoided saying anything negative about the man who hasn’t been home for a holiday recently or even called in a while, as far as Cas knows. That’s what Bobby says, anyway.

“My brother.” Dean sighs. “I’ve kept my brother out of this shit.”

“Why?”

“Because he doesn’t deserve to sacrifice his life, you know?”

“And you do?”

“I’m not saying I do, I’m just saying he doesn’t,” Dean growls. _He’s getting agitated._ Good. He needs to be pushed to think about this.

“So what makes him so special that he gets a free pass and you don’t?”

“It’s just… he’s the younger one. It was my job to look out for him, take care of him. He needed to be able to just be a kid.”

“And now? He’s an adult, right?”

“Yeah, but now he has a wife and a job and a kid and shit. I can’t ask him to uproot everything and move across the country just for us.”

_Uproot everything?_ Cas finds it interesting that Dean has extrapolated their talk about holidays to talk about the everyday. He goes with it. “Why not?”

“Why not? Because that’s not fair! Because he has a life!” Dean stands and starts to pace.

“And what about _your_ life?” Cas challenges, standing to meet him. “What about what’s fair to _you_?”

“This _is_ my life and that’s the way it is.”

“No, that’s the way you’ve made it.”

“I have not!” Dean shouts.

“Who said you had to take care of your brother? Who said you had to stick around here? Who said you have to be Bobby’s caregiver?”

“My father!”
“Well, he’s not here, is he? So who’s saying it now?”

“Me! I’m saying it! ‘Cause that’s what you do for family! You make sacrifices!”

Cas folds his arms and arches a brow. “Oh? So what’s Sam’s sacrifice? What’s your father’s? Because the only person I see making sacrifices here is you.”

“So what?”

“So you have an opportunity to stop that, but you won’t. Why?”

“I don’t wanna abandon Bobby.”

“ Asking for help is abandoning Bobby?”

“No, but I can’t ask anyone.”

“Of course you can. You can ask Sam. You can ask Karen’s family. But you don’t.”

“It’s pointless to ask for help when I already know the answer,” Dean grumbles, looking completely defeated.

“You can ask me, Dean.”

“You do enough.”

“Dean—”

“Why the hell are we even talking about this, Cas?”

Pointing a finger at Dean, Cas growls, “Because you, Dean Winchester, devalue yourself. You deserve much more than you’re giving yourself. You deserve more happy holidays. You deserve to have help. You deserve to have your own life that exists outside of your role as a caregiver. You deserve to have people who will sacrifice for you.” Cas has the unsettling feeling that he’s talking to his younger self. Maybe even his current self. “I know where this path goes, Dean, and it’s nowhere good.”

“Why the fuck do you care?”

“Why the fuck do I care? Because I’m your friend and this is what friends do. They care. If you don’t want me to be your friend, tell me now and I’ll back off and mind my own business.”

“Mind your own business? Pfft. Fat chance of that. You haven’t minded your own business since we met,” Dean huffs, rolling his eyes. “God, all you seem to wanna do is push me and piss me off. Why do I want to be friends with you?”

Cas knows Dean’s just lashing out because he’s feeling cornered. He’s been through this many times with many people he’s confronted for their own good, and it’s always turned out fine once they licked their wounds. He’s never taken it personally. So the sudden tightness in his chest surprises him, and he doesn’t like at all. He pushes it away as he pushes Dean off the hook. “I don’t piss you off. I care enough to speak up and make you think, and that’s what pisses you off.”

“Well, I don’t need it!”

“Fine. Look at me. Look at me and tell me you don’t want someone in your life who cares enough about you to be pissed off that you haven’t had help from your family or anyone else. Look at me
and tell me you don’t want someone who gives a shit about you having the life you want. Look at me and tell me you don’t want me to be your friend.”

The weight of Dean’s stare, fiery and intense, bears down upon him. Cas meets it with his steely gaze until Dean wavers. He turns on his heel and storms down the driveway, then down the street. Cas, satisfied with himself even if his stomach is in knots, heads into the house.

“Everything okay out there?” Bobby asks.

“Oh yeah. Dean went for a walk to clear his head.”

“You out there shakin’ him up?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, good,” Bobby says with a little smirk.

Cas grins in response, then gets an idea he thinks will shake them both up. “Bobby, you want to sit on the couch?”

Not having the Hoyer lift, Cas transfers Bobby to the couch in his arms instead. Bobby has a few spasms and Cas can tell that he’s self-conscious about it, but everyone is kind and Ellen whispers something to Bobby that makes him laugh. He props him up with pillows and elevates his feet, careful not to stretch his legs too much and make him uncomfortable.

“Ain’t been on anything but that chair and my bed in a long time,” he says to Cas quietly when Cas is adjusting him. Cas smiles and clasps his shoulder, saying nothing. Bobby has no idea he’s about to experience something else he hasn’t in a long time.

“Snuggle time!” Charlie squeals. She knows just how to read Cas’ mind. This is something they did for her mom, too. It’s rare that people who use wheelchairs (or any people, really) get as much affectionate human touch as they need.

“What the…” Bobby says before he gets Charlie pressed to his side. She links her arm with his. Ellen immediately sits on his other side and does the same. Cas would have, but he’s glad Ellen takes the initiative and follows Charlie’s lead, even if she doesn’t know what the hell Cas is up to. Jo takes the space on the other side of Ellen, which warms Cas’ heart. He’s pretty sure the mom and daughter don’t do much snuggling these days, either. Cas sits next to Charlie.

“It’s a family thing,” Cas explains to Bobby. “Are you complaining about being surrounded by beautiful women?”

“Hell no,” he says with a softness that belies his words before Jo yells about a flag on the field, calling his attention back to the game. Cas smiles. He gets up and makes popcorn, even though they just ate, and plops it on Bobby’s lap as they all settle in together.

Dean is clearly taken aback when, upon his return, he’s greeted with the sight of five people snuggling on the sectional couch. “What the hell?” he asks. Cas notices his face is red, and probably not just from the cold. Midge, who followed him inside, walks to the couch and jumps onto Charlie’s lap.

“What?” Bobby asks, almost defiantly. “We’re watchin’ the game.”

“You’re… uh, okay,” Dean says, sounding very confused.
“Come snuggle!” Charlie calls.

“Plenty of room,” Cas says. He strokes the cat and peers at Dean, subtly challenging him to accept the affection being offered, to allow himself something good.

Dean looks at Cas, then licks his lips and swallows. “Uh, yeah,” he says after a moment. He toes off his shoes and dumps his jacket on a chair, then rounds the corner of the couch. Cas stands and gestures toward Charlie, who extends her arm with a huge grin. Dean returns it and collapses by her side. She wraps her arm around his neck until he’s leaning into her, still smiling as he snuggles her. Since it’s a commercial break, Cas remains standing and gets everyone’s attention, then takes a couple of pictures. He shows everyone and sends the approved photos to their phones.

Excusing himself, Cas stands in the hall and gazes at the pictures. Everyone looks so happy, and he did that. He made that happen. It brings him a quiet joy that something he did brought others that kind of happiness, that sense of family. No matter how much he tried, he could never bring that to his own family, to his out-of-touch father and his out-of-touch-with-reality mother. There were many reasons for that, he understands now, but it hurt quite a bit then. He closes his eyes for a moment against the memories, then heads back to the living room. As he approaches, his eyes scan over the people gathered on the couch and he freezes. Bobby looks as pleased as can be between Charlie and Ellen, and he wouldn’t squeeze himself in the middle, anyway. Ellen and Jo look content together, and he doesn’t want to mess with that mother-daughter bond. Charlie and Dean also look content together, and he’s not sure how Dean is feeling about him at the moment. There’s no place for him among them. But what else is new, Castiel? You’re always on the outside looking in. So Cas does what he usually does—he makes himself useful. He clears away the empty bowl of popcorn, then gets drinks for everyone, handing Bobby’s to Charlie. Not knowing what else to do at the moment, he sits at the far end of the sectional by himself and pretends to be engrossed in the game so Charlie and Jo don’t ask him what the hell he’s doing and why he isn’t joining them. He’s only there for a few seconds when he realizes that Charlie or Jo will probably start asking anyway. Popping back onto his feet, he pretends he doesn’t see several sets of eyes looking his way as he goes to the kitchen and starts unloading the dishwasher as quietly as he can so he doesn’t interfere with the TV volume. He comments on the game every so often to show he’s still engaged with everyone and to throw them off of his suddenly melancholy scent. Ugh, you need to stop the surprise pity party you’re throwing for yourself. He finishes and is about to load a second batch of dishes when he feels a presence next to him.

“You gonna come back and join us?” Dean asks a little too casually, dropping his glass into the empty dishwasher.

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“Nah, I’ll watch from here,” Cas answers with an also-too-casual wave of his hand as he avoids eye contact and focuses on his task.

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“Come on. Plenty of room,” he imitates Cas in a small, hesitant voice.

“I’m fine here, thanks. This needs to get done.”

“I’m fine here, thanks. This needs to get done.”

“I’ll help you, then.”

“I’ll help you, then.”

“I’m fine by myself!” he blurts, a little harshly. At Dean’s grimace, he takes a breath and adds softly, “I don’t need your help. Thank you, though. Go enjoy yourself.” He nudges his head at the TV, where the Lions are about to win handily, before he starts loading glasses into the top rack. Instead of leaving, though, Dean steps closer.

“I’m sorry about earlier, Cas,” Dean says quietly.
Cas glances up briefly as he continues loading. “No need, Dean. I know you get upset when I push you.”

“Not an excuse,” he says. “Can we talk”—he glances over his shoulder—“somewhere out of earshot of everyone?”

Cas shrugs. “If you want. Follow me.” He leads Dean to Charlie’s office, where they sit on the couch. They use the room as a makeshift guest bedroom when needed. It used to be Trudy’s room. He can still see the traces of her presence in the floorboards and the shadows on the walls. “What’s up?”

“We’re not good right now. I want us to be good again.”

“We’re fine.”

“No, I was a jerk and now you’re mad at me. And you should be. I totally deserve it.”

“I’m not mad. I’m simply giving you your space.”

“No, no it’s…it’s more than that. You won’t even come to the couch, and I just...I just need us to be okay.”

“We are, Dean.” Cas leans against the arm of the couch. “I pushed, you got angry, I expected that.”

“But then I shot my mouth off about our friendship, and that was shitty, and I’m so sorry.”

“Dean, it’s okay—”

“It’s not,” Dean growls. “Don’t let me off the hook for that shit. That wasn’t okay to do to you.”

His words unsettle Cas, so he focuses his energy on Dean, who heaves a long sigh and splays his hand across his face. Cas pulls his arm gently until he’s not hiding anymore, then allows his hand to rest on his forearm. Dean’s shiny eyes meet his.

“I don’t know what to do with your kind of friendship,” Dean admits in a raspy whisper. “I want it so bad but I don’t know what to do with it. All my friendships...everyone...I never let people get too close, Cas. Hurts less when they don’t show up for me when I need ‘em.”

Cas’ heart aches. He knows the feeling Dean’s describing. He slides his hand down to Dean’s without thinking and grasps it. At the surprise on Dean’s face, he almost retracts it, but intuition tells him to wait. He’s glad he does when he feels the tension drain from Dean’s body.

“The stuff you keep bringing up and you’re all pissed off about... I get pissed off about it, too.” Dean’s hands tremble as he glances at Cas uncertainly.

“I know, and it’s okay.”

“I’ve never told anyone that.”

“I’m that kind of friend, Dean. The kind of friend you can be real with even though I piss you off.”

Dean’s lips tick up at Cas’ jibe but fall quickly. “Guess I got so good at pushing people away that no one bothered to push back.”

“Well, I’m very pushy, so,” Cas shrugs. It punches a laugh out of Dean. Cas marvels at how beautiful the spark of happiness looks on him.
“That was the very first thing that pissed me off about you,” Dean says with a lopsided grin.

“That’s how most people react.” Cas says, chuckling with a bit of pride and maybe a bit of pain, too.

“I like it, though,” he admits quietly. It throws Cas a little. His pushiness has always served a purpose—to get his own or someone else’s needs met—but he’s never seen it as a trait that could be endearing. “I do wanna be friends with you, Cas, ‘cause you’re an awesome guy. You’re funny and caring and I like being with you. And yeah, you’re kind of infuriating at times, but in the best way, ‘cause you make me think about myself and I can tell you care about me. I’m sorry about my knee-jerk reaction. I never meant to hurt your feelings. It was a shitty thing to do to the only friend who cares about me the way you do.”

Cas clears his throat. He’s touched by Dean’s sincere apology. And though his feelings weren’t hurt—he doesn’t let his feelings get hurt anymore—he finds the knots in his stomach have unraveled.

“Thank you, Dean.”

“We okay?”

“Of course.”

Dean scrutinizes him before squeezing his hand again, then letting go. “I should probably get Bobby home.”

“Alright, I’ll follow so I can assist Bobby with supper—”

“No, no, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Well, I’ll see you for bedtime, then.”

“No, it’s a holiday. Take the day off.”

“Dean—”

“Cas, this isn’t my refusing help bullshit. I promise. I just think you deserve to have the holiday off, alright? I’m good, really.”

Fairly certain he’s being sincere, Cas acquiesces. “I’m a phone call away.”

“I know, man. If you wanna help me get him back into the chair, though, I’d appreciate it.”

Cas smiles and leads Dean out the door, then to the living room, where Bobby and Charlie have both fallen asleep. Dean wakes Bobby (which wakes Charlie), then preps the chair while Cas transfers him. After adjusting his foot paddles, Dean tilts his chair backwards with the press of a lever and pulls him up so he isn’t slouching, then places him back into an upright position.

“Thank you for everything,” Bobby says, his gruff voice sincere in its sentiment.

“Oh, you’re welcome!” Charlie squeals, her batteries sufficiently energized from the nap, it seems.

“You guys should make it home in time to catch the second half. Go Raiders,” Jo smirks. Bobby scowls. Cas must’ve missed talk of that particular rivalry.

“Thanks so much, everyone,” Dean concurs with Bobby’s statement. “Had a great time.”

“Yes! We will do this again, won’t we, Cas?”
“Charlie, could I ever deny you?”

“Of course not,” she grins. There’s a lot of truth in that statement and they both know it. “Oh, I have food for you guys to take home!”

While Charlie plies Dean with leftover everything, Cas takes Bobby outside, Midge at his heels. “Did you enjoy yourself? Be truthful,” Cas says to him as he locks him into the lift.

“I did,” he says. “Was nice to be around family, even if it ain’t mine.”

“Well, hopefully that can change with your own family,” Cas says. “But don’t fool yourself. Once you enter Charlie’s home, you’re family. She won’t have it any other way.”

“Got that feelin’,” Bobby chuckles. “You and Dean alright?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Stubborn son of a gun, ain’t he?”

“Very. Unfortunately for him, I’m just as stubborn.”

“I might say that’s a fortunate thing, son.” The warmth in Bobby’s eyes expands Cas’ chest.

Dean comes out and opens the passenger door, slinging several bags of food into the footwell of the front passenger seat. “We’re not gonna starve,” Dean jokes. He closes the door just as Cas says goodbye to Bobby with a squeeze to his shoulder and does the same. Cas turns to find Dean standing close to him, looking unsure. “Hey,” he murmurs, his eyes directed at Cas’ chest.

“Hey.”

“Um, just wanted to say thanks again. This was the best Thanksgiving I’ve had in a long time.”

“Really? Even with everything that happened?”

“How can I have a bad holiday when I have great food and snuggling on the couch and people who care all around me? Even what happened between us… the thing that made me the most miserable today wasn’t the fight. It was thinkin’ that maybe we wouldn’t fix this and that…”

Dean is looking anywhere but at him. Midge winds her way around their ankles. Cas waits, wondering if he’ll finish his thought. When he just stares at the cat, Cas reaches out and takes his elbow, a small gesture of comfort to quell whatever anxiety is keeping his words locked in his mind. “We fixed it, Dean. We’re good.”

A moment later, Dean is wrapped around him. Surprised, Cas holds him tightly, feeling the tension in his muscles seep out. Cas’ body relaxes, too; Dean’s touch is clinging and cradling all at once, a request for support as well as an offer of comfort to Cas, who he believes he hurt. It stirs up old feelings he thought he’d suppressed, as well as a couple of new ones.

“Ooh, we hug now? Yay!” Charlie calls before running toward them. Jo and Ellen have their coats on; they are working tonight and must be heading out. Cas separates from Dean so that Dean can receive Charlie’s octopus hug. Her tiny body wraps around Dean’s larger frame as he picks her up and holds her close. The smile on his face is pure and open and sweet. She’s good for him. Cas embraces Ellen and Jo before they take their turns with Dean and then Bobby, who’s now being showered with hugs since Charlie opened his door.
When everyone’s had their fill and are about to go their separate ways, Dean pipes up. “Hey, we need another picture. The last one was incomplete,” he says, glancing at Cas. “Everyone pile around Bobby!”

The six of them squeeze into the picture that Dean takes. It’s not the prettiest picture Cas has ever seen—the light is low and Bobby’s head is cut off above his eyebrows—but Dean declares it “perfect” as he sends it to everyone. He says goodbye with a squeeze of Cas’ bicep.

That night, after Charlie and Cas eat pie for supper and watch bad TV, he opens his phone and looks again at the message Dean sent along with the photo:

*To Cas 4:27pm: [1 photo] It just wasn’t complete without you.*

When he goes to bed, Cas lies alone and thinks of Dean.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for the following:
- Mentions of delusions/psychosis
- Mentions of suicide
- Mentions of death/grief
- Mentions of drug/alcohol abuse

Next chapter: So much fluff, and some alone time for our Cas and Dean. ;)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Soooo fluffy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It hits Dean that there’s only a couple of weeks until Christmas, and he’s actually in the mood to celebrate this year—not just for Bobby’s sake, but because he has the fragile beginnings of a family. Since their Thanksgiving together, Dean’s been downright happy. During the week, he’s looked forward to coming home to Bobby and Cas, and Cas has continued to spend his evenings with them, getting Bobby to bed and staying a little while after. They’ve even grown closer since the Thanksgiving conflict they had, Dean thinks. He’s cut back to half a day at work on Saturdays and he’s taking Sundays off consistently now, which feels absolutely incredible. He and Bobby have been spending those Sundays with Cas, Charlie, and Jo, either at their place or at Charlie and Cas’. When they part, it’s with hugs and promises to see each other again soon.

And oh, the hugging. It really has become a thing they do now. Once that gate was opened, there was no hope of closing it, not if Charlie had anything to say about it. But who is he kidding? Dean doesn’t want to close it. He’s enjoying the closeness with Bobby, Charlie, Jo, Ellen, and Cas. The Cas hugs may be a little too awesome, but he tries not to think too hard about that. He’s trying to be friends with the attractive bastard.

Christmas at their place is usually a pre-lit tree, a dinner for two, a few gifts for Bobby that Dean buys last minute and keeps in the bags since Bobby can’t unwrap them anyway, and cash from the Wizard of Oz cookie jar for Dean from Bobby “to buy something nice for yourself for once.” Dean always jams the cash into his coffee fund at work. He wonders what Cas and Charlie will be doing. He wonders if Bobby will want to do anything different than they’ve always done.

He gets his answer when he arrives home one cold Tuesday evening.

“What the fuck, you guys?” Dean says, smiling widely at the electric candles in the windows, the gold garland strung up around the living room, and the tree decorated with not just the lights, but actual ornaments, many of which he remembers from when Aunt Karen was still alive. She loved the Hallmark collectibles. He glances down and sees gifts wrapped in festive paper tucked under the tree. Dean knows he didn’t buy any of them. “What are these?”

“They’re Christmas gifts, ya idjit,” Bobby gruffs. “For you and the girls.”

“We went shopping today,” Cas explains to him with a warm smile that makes Dean’s heart leap.

“You guys have been busy,” he comments to Cas. He must have been here all day.

“Cas promised me a steak for lunch if I went,” Bobby says.

“Uh, excuse me, as I recall you said…” Cas starts, then pauses to give Bobby a significant look.

“We ain’t talking about what I said.”

“Yes, sir,” Cas grins with a twinkle in his eye.
Dean knows he’s missing something, probably some sort of heartfelt sentiment his uncle doesn’t want to discuss and was difficult for him to bring up with Cas in the first place. Or maybe not so difficult. Cas has this knack for caring for people so well that it makes them want to open up to him. Dean himself has fallen for it a few times.

“So, me and the girls, huh?” Dean crouches in front of the tree and looks at the tags. “Charlie, Jo, Ellen… nice. Sam, Amelia, and Allie too, huh? I gotta get on that so I can get their stuff mailed out. And damn, how many did you get for me?” He counts seven.

“Had some catchin’ up to do,” Bobby says quietly.

Dean raises his eyes to meet Bobby’s. “No, you didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, agree to disagree. Anyway, gonna have to go out with you sometime to get Cas’ present, so you’ll have to take a weekend off.”

Cas, who’d moved into the kitchen, calls out, “Oh, no gifts for me, please, but thank you for your thoughtfulness.”

“Why the hell not?”

“It can complicate the relationship.”

“Aw, well ain’t that too bad, princess? You’re gettin’ one. Don’t think I don’t know you bought me and Dean gifts already. Charlie ain’t much for secrets.” Bobby looks at Dean and nods decisively.

“No changing his mind once it’s made,” Dean says, shrugging as he addresses Cas, who pins him with a pleading stare. Cas rolls his eyes and pulls the lasagna out of the oven, and they eat at the table with the new Santa and Mrs. Claus salt and pepper shakers.

Dean does take the weekend off and spends Saturday with Bobby, shopping and eating lunch at the Roadhouse. He’d never imagined having something like this with his uncle again. Bobby and Dean each find a gift for Cas, but Dean doesn’t feel like he knows enough about the ladies yet to know just what they’d like (or what they might already have).

“You oughta invite Cas to shop with you tomorrow,” Bobby suggests that night. “He could help you.”

Alone time with Cas? Outside of the house? Tempting. Still… “Not sure he’d wanna do that. Plus, it’s Sunday Funday. That’s his thing with Charlie and Jo.”

“And you.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I’m just sayin’ to try it out, see what happens. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“I dunno.”

“Call Charlie for me.”

“What?”

“I want to call Charlie. Dial it for me.”

Reluctantly, Dean dials Charlie’s number. “Hey, Deanie Beanie! Everything okay?”
“Uh, yeah. Bobby wants to talk to you.”

“Oh! Alright, put him on.” When he does, he hears, “Bobby-Boo! What’s up?” Bobby-Boo?

“I think Dean and Cas should get a day to themselves tomorrow to go out and do their Christmas shopping and have lunch. What do you think?”

“I love it! I’ll tell him! Jo and I will come over to your place tomorrow and have Sunday Funday, just the three of us! We can watch football and eat loaded nachos!”

“I’m all for that.”

“Yay! See you tomorrow!” She hangs up and Bobby turns to Dean with a smug expression. Dean scowls and pretends to be much more pissed off than he actually is.

Glancing in the mirror on Sunday, Dean curses himself for not investing more in his wardrobe. Not that it should matter, since they’re just two friends going shopping, but still. He figures he hasn’t bought himself a new shirt or jeans in a couple of years. Maybe he’ll do a little shopping for himself. He hears his friends’ voices as they crash through the door. Smoothing a little styling cream into his hair, he stares at himself one more time before heading to the living room and pretending he isn’t a nervous wreck about going Christmas shopping, of all things.

“I’m told we’re going shopping today,” Cas says with a soft smile and softer eyes that appear to be glowing as they look at him. A trick of the lighting, probably, Dean thinks even as his palms sweat and a flush creeps up his neck. Cas is dressed in black jeans with those boots Dean likes, a couple of shirts layered over a t-shirt, and his leather jacket and scarf. Damn. He swallows against the rise of arousal clawing at his chest.

“That’s the rumor,” Dean answers, the flush now heating up his face. “We’ll take my car so we don’t have to be seen in your pimpmobile, alright?”

“Fine,” Cas answers with good humor and that same soft, cute smile. It’s NOT cute. We are FRIENDS.

They wave goodbye to Bobby and the ladies, who are already making themselves at home. “Jo is surprisingly comfortable around you two,” Cas comments as they head onto the road.

“What, are we not likable?”

“You know that’s not what I’m saying. She’s just warmed up much faster to the two of you than she usually does to new people, that’s all.”

“Well, we’re irresistible, what can we say?” Dean banters with a cheeky grin. Cas glances at him before looking away, not arguing Dean’s point. Dean pulls at his jacket. It feels warm in the car even though the heat hasn’t kicked in yet.

The mall is packed. “Brought Bobby here yesterday, but before that I can honestly say I hadn’t been to the mall in at least a couple of years, probably more,” Dean comments as shoppers weave around them.

“I can’t believe you’d deprive yourself of the endless holiday music, millions of germs, cranky a**holes, and body odor.”

“Yeah, I was really missing out.”
And though he knows they were joking, Dean really does feel like he’s missed out, especially with all the fun they end up having. Cas has a lot to say about mall Santas and Hickory Farms, and he’s a willing and able clothes shopper and critic when Dean picks out a few new things for himself. He does a spot-on imitation of Tan France, which leads to the revelation that Cas watches Queer Eye, which Dean finds both fascinating and secretly delightful. They talk at length about the most recent episodes and laugh about how the men would think that they’re complete disasters.

“Would you like a traditional Victorian Christmas, Dean?” Cas asks him later as they round a table at Macy’s filled with holiday treats. “Figgy pudding, perhaps? You can have parlor games?”

Dean knows he’s referencing an episode of The Big Bang Theory. “You get yourself all excited for pudding, and here comes a cake with raisins in it,” Dean quotes as he laughs, Cas snickering along with him.

“Santa thinks dating you is punishment enough,” Cas quotes in return.

Dean chuckles and says, “He’d be right.”

“He would not.” Cas’ look is fond but stern. “Anyone would be lucky to date you, Dean.”

That was unexpected. “Anyone, huh?” his mouth says without his brain’s permission.

“Anyone,” Cas answers, soft and certain.

Dean’s not sure how to respond. “Whatever you say, man.”

Cas smirks. “Oh, not arguing for once. Christmas miracles do happen.”

“Shut the fuck up,” he says, shoving Cas as they head toward Starbucks for some caffeinated fuel.

Cas is invaluable when it comes to finding gifts for his “wives” and Ellen. He even helps him find some stuff for Bobby at the bookstore and the home goods store. They really could use some glasses rather than just mugs and water bottles, and they never did get some after they’d talked about it last. Cas picks up a handful of things, but mostly makes witty commentary about everything around them that has Dean in stitches.

“Are you finished shopping?” Cas asks after an eye-opening visit to someplace called Hot Topic. It’s been a while since he’s seen teenagers in their natural habitat.

Dean glances at his phone and is shocked to see it’s already 2:30 in the afternoon. That shock morphs into an unsettling disappointment. They’re done shopping and never even stopped for lunch. Cas will probably want to go home, since their mission is complete. “Yeah, I think I’m done,” he says reluctantly.

“Do you want to get away from the mall? There’s a great little Italian place called Sofia’s a few miles from here. They have Sunday specials and their ravioli and cannoli are both out of this world.”

Disappointment flutters away on the thousands of butterflies’ wings in his gut. “Yeah, sounds awesome.”

As soon as they walk into the restaurant and hang their coats, Cas is greeted with hugs and kisses to his cheeks. “Oh, Castiel, how are you, sweetheart? It’s been too long!” a lovely, dark-haired woman says. Cas accepts her gestures easily, then leans down to hug and kiss the diminutive older woman next to her.
“It has been, I know,” he smiles. “But I couldn’t have a free Sunday and not come by, especially when I have someone with me who doesn’t know how delicious the food is here.”

The older woman scrutinizes Dean. “You haven’t been here before? For shame! Well, once you’re here, you’re family. Come in. You need to eat, you look like you’re going to drop. What’s with these dark circles and skinny arms?”

“Oh, Mama, they don’t look that skinny, look at the muscle here,” the younger woman says, squeezing his bicep. Dean’s eyes dart to Cas, who’s watching with amusement. “I’m Giulia, and this is my mother, Sofia,” she explains as she leads them to their table. “We are so happy to welcome you to our home. Come, sit.”

“Home?”

“We treat you like you’re a guest at our home,” she explains as she pours water. “And we’re here all the time, so it certainly feels like we live here.” Cas laughs behind him, so Dean feels okay about cracking a smile. “Castiel knows the menu, but I’ll give you time to look, caro.” She turns to Cas and asks, “Your usual, tesoro mio?”

“Stop,” Castiel blushes. “Yes, please.”

“Of course. I shall return.” She breezes by, her floral perfume lingering.

Dean smiles at Cas’ pinkened cheeks. “Looks like you have a fan. What was she saying?”

“Aww.”

“Stop,” he laughs, shoving Dean’s arm. Cas always becomes softer when shown affection, like a human Snugli. One he’d really like to wrap himself in. “I rented the apartment above here for years until I moved in with Charlie.”

“Ah. She has a little crush on you, huh?”

“No, she’s just affectionate.”

Dean shakes his head. “Women flock to you, man. You’d have hundreds of ‘em knocking down your door if you swung that way.”

“That’s probably why they do. We’re safe for each other.” Cas focuses intently on his glass of water as Dean ponders what he meant by that. Him being safe for the women Dean understands—men can be leches sometimes—but women being safe for him…Dean decides to ponder that one a little longer.

Cas’ “usual” is an appetizer plate that comes quickly. Giulia pushes the plate between them and sets small plates down in front of the men. “Ricotta and Tomato Bruschetta with Pancetta,” she explains to Dean. “Do you know what you’d like to eat?”

Dean hasn’t really looked at the menu. “Have Sofia decide for me,” he says, handing her his menu. Her eyes sparkle.

“Oh, she will be delighted, caro,” she gushes. “Castiel?”

“I would be remiss if I didn’t order the ravioli,” he smiles and she laughs. Private joke, maybe? He
watches as she floats away, then as Cas digs into the bruschetta with a pleased hum. “Try it,” he says around a mouthful.

Dean picks up a piece of the crusty bread and bites. “Fuck, that’s good,” he mumbles.

“Mmmhmm. Everything’s fresh here. They make their own pasta, grow their own herbs.”

“Wow. Fancy. And here I thought Chef Boyardee was the way to go.”

“Don’t let Sofia hear you say that. She’ll punch you in the mouth,” Cas warns him. He believes it.

They talk about the upcoming holiday and Dean dares to ask, “So, what are you guys doing?”

“Very little. Jo is working on Christmas Eve, so we’ll probably go down to the Roadhouse for a bit after I help Bobby with his evening routine. On Christmas Day we’ll sleep in and exchange gifts, then watch A Christmas Story on repeat until one of us stops being lazy and makes the meal. It’s Charlie’s first Christmas without her mom, so we’ll keep it simple, I think. How about you? I know you usually make a meal or something.”

“Yeah. We don’t do much on Christmas Eve. I’ll probably just work, maybe pick up Chinese food on the way home. Then—wait, did you say you’re coming over to help Bobby to bed? On Christmas Eve? No. You take Christmas Eve off, too.”

“Dean, it’s fine, unless you don’t want me to intrude on your—”

“It’s not that, Cas, it’s Christmas. Take time off. Be with Charlie. She’s going to need you.”

Cas inhales deeply. “Perhaps,” he says. “Of course, you’re welcome to come to the Roadhouse with us, if you’d like.”

“Bars aren’t really my thing. Lunchtime is different, but at prime drinking time…I don’t know. Brings back a lot of memories of my dad drunk off his ass.”

After a moment of thought, Cas says, “Let me see what the plan is. Sometimes Ellen opens up a side room for private parties. We may be able to use that.”

“You don’t have to do that for me.”

“Ellen would insist, I assure you. She has adopted you,” he grins gently.

“Nothing special for me, man.”

“No promises. Ellen does what Ellen wants.”

Dean chuckles as their meals are delivered: for Cas, chicken cacciatore ravioli, and for Dean, saltimbocca. Sofia follows Giulia with two glasses of red wine. “To celebrate,” Sofia explains.

“Celebrate what?” Cas asks.

“You finally bringing a handsome date here,” she winks. A rosy blush blooms on Cas’ cheeks even though he hasn’t had a single taste of wine yet.

“He’s not my date,” Cas explains in a small voice, one Dean’s never heard. He’s not sure what to make of it.

Sofia eyes them both, then gives Cas a significant look. “He should be. He is handsome, yes?”
“He’s…yes, he’s very handsome, but—”

“And he’s a good man?”

“Of course, yes, he’s a very good man—”

“And he could have anyone he wants, but here he sits with you. How lucky for you. Do not let such good fortune go to waste.”

Unflappable Cas is clearly flapped; his face is scarlet. It’s adorable…and Dean sees an opportunity for a little revenge, of sorts, for every time that Cas sets him off-balance with his intense care and concern for him. “You did say anyone would be lucky to date me. You wanna get lucky, Cas?”

“You’re all out to get me,” he mumbles, hiding his face.

They all have a good laugh at Cas’ expense before Sofia leans down and moves a hand from his face. “He’s a good man, and he likes you, too,” she says, and now Dean blushes. What really gets his attention, though, is when Sofia whispers, “Don’t let yourself be alone any longer, tesoro mio. Allow yourself joy.” She pats his hand and the mother-daughter duo walk away, leaving both men in an introspective silence.

“Sorry about the wine and the…dating,” Cas says finally.

“Nah, it’s fine. I drink wine every once in a while. Doesn’t have the same memories as beer, you know? As far as the dating stuff, don’t worry about it.” He pauses, debating whether to ask about his dating life. The man blushes anytime dating is mentioned…or dating Dean, anyway. “You date much?” he finally asks.

“No, not in some time."

“Me neither, but you probably guessed that.”

Cas glances up and smiles. “Yes. That is a shame. You are denying someone a unique opportunity.”

Dean squints at him, frowning. “‘Unique.’ I don’t know if that’s an insult or not.”

“And you never will,” Cas murmurs over the rim of his wine glass. Dean bursts into laughter as Cas’ cheeky grin.

Cas asks him about the saltimbocca, which is incredible, and they forget about dating and move on to talk about food in general. Before Dean knows it, they’ve each emptied two wine glasses and finished their meals. Giulia returns with a plate of gorgeous golden brown tubes of crispy pastry filled with creamy goodness. “Cannoli,” she says as she sets the plate before them. “Castiel’s favorite. Enjoy.”

And enjoy they do. The cannoli are sinful, the perfect end to a perfect meal. Dean orders a half-dozen to bring back to Bobby, Charlie, and Jo. They argue about the bill between themselves (each man wanting to cover it) and then with Giulia (who didn’t include the extra glasses of wine nor the cannoli they shared). Sofia comes and urges Cas to follow her, leaving Dean to negotiate the bill with Giulia.

“Forget the bill,” Giulia says as soon as Cas is out of sight. “You like him?”

“Uh, Cas? Yeah, of course.”
“Good. But you will need to be persistent.”

Dean frowns. *Persistent? Why...oh.* “Um, I don’t think he feels like that toward me.”

“Oh, he does. He looks at you with greater affection than Benjamin, and it has been far too long
since”—she sneers, wrinkling her nose in disgust—“Jonathan. But you will need to be persistent and
you will need to be bold. If you let him decide everything, he will decide to be alone.” Giulia pats his
hand. “Can you do that?”

His thoughts are like a pinball, bouncing from bumper to bumper. *He likes me? Really? Was this a
date? No. But it felt like one. He thinks I’m handsome and good. He brought me here and he doesn’t
bring people here. And who the fuck are Benjamin and Jonathan? Did those assholes hurt Cas?
Could we actually be something? Do I want to be?*

“Hell yes,” Dean says just as they see Sofia and Cas round the corner. Cas is carrying a large bag
and gesturing widely. He smiles when he catches Dean’s eyes and, yup, Dean knows this is going to
be an uphill battle, but it’s one he’s willing to wage.

Chapter End Notes

Referenced in this chapter:
Queer Eye, Netflix
The Big Bang Theory, CBS

Next chapter: Ride ‘em, cowboy. ;)

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Christmas cookies, anyone?

There’s a lot of fluff but some serious stuff, too, so see the warnings at the end if you feel you need them. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forget *Miracle on 34th Street*. The real miracles this Christmas are happening right here.

Dean looks around the Roadhouse at everyone gathered in the private room—Bobby, Cas, Charlie, Jo, Ellen, Cas’ friends Gabe, Zar, and Meg, Garth and his wife Bess, Benny and his wife Andrea, and Allie and Sam. Yeah, his niece and his brother, here on Christmas Eve. Christmas Miracle Number One.

“Still can’t believe you’re here,” he says to his brother.

“Still can’t believe we’re here,” Sam says, gesturing to the Roadhouse and to the people around them. “I didn’t think you went out anymore. I was starting to think you were both becoming hermits.”

“Yeah,” Dean says. Sam has no idea how close to the truth he is. Or was, perhaps. “Cas sort of forced us to come out of hiding.”

“That’s good, man. He’s working out, huh? I know you guys had a hard time keeping people.”

“Yeah, he’s working out,” Dean says, shooting a fond glance at Cas. Since their restaurant not-date, he’s been watching Cas for definite signs of interest. He won’t implement the whole “go bold” plan until he’s sure. Like Sam said, Cas is working out for Bobby, and he’s become a great friend, too. He doesn’t want to ruin things. And yet, he can’t shake the feelings he gets whenever Cas is near—the excitement and the yearning. He looks back at Sam to see his brother smirking at him.

“Yeah, looks like he’s working out, all right. You guys a thing?”

“No.” His brother raises an incredulous brow. “Not yet, anyway.” The brow settles. “So, what’s so important that Amelia had to stay back? Must’ve been something to miss Christmas.”

Sam shifts awkwardly. “It’s, uh… well, it’s not working out between us.”

Dean stares at his brother. “What do you mean?”

“We’re divorcing. Some old flame came back around and, well, that was it.”

“Seriously? That’s shitty, man.”

Sam shrugs his large shoulders. “It’s for the best. We haven’t been good for a while. If we were good, having this guy breeze back through wouldn’t have led to anything.”
“Still sucks, but yeah,” Dean agrees. “How long?”

“We’ve been separated for a couple of months now.”

That gives Dean pause. “What did you do for Thanksgiving?”

“Volunteered to work.”

“Dude. You could’ve come here. We actually had a decent one for once.”

A shadow passes over Sam’s face. “Money,” he explains.

Dean thinks it’s bullshit. He lets it go, for now. “I’m glad you’re here, man,” he says instead.

“Me too,” Sam answers, sounding sincere. He looks around. “Cas like kids?”

Dean follows Sam’s eyes across the room, where five-year-old Allie is staring at Cas and Cas is staring right back. “I have no idea,” he says eventually.

“She seems fascinated by him.”

“He’s a fascinating guy.”

Sam snorts and Dean swats him.

A while later, Sam is across the room talking to Bobby, Allie asleep in his arms. Jo has taken his seat and they’re talking about the latest season of Black Mirror when a redheaded puppy lands in his lap.

“Good party, hey, Deanie Beanie?” Charlie says.

“Great party.” He jiggles his legs so she’s bouncing, her fruity drink sloshing around the glass (but not spilling because she has it half gone already). She giggles and places a hand on his arm as he bounces her harder, then shrieks as he shifts his legs side to side in an attempt to make her fall off.

“I didn’t think you could have that much fun sitting on a man’s lap, Charlie,” Cas says, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as she nearly tumbles off.

“You can ride next. He’s a great ride,” she chirps with an impish grin.

“I’m sure he is,” Cas says, rolling his eyes.

Dean sees an opportunity, and he’ll be damned if he doesn’t at least try. “What, Cas? Afraid of a little bucking bronco action? Might get too rough for ya?”

Cas stares him down, a brow raised in a look that’s dominant (and hot) as hell. “Hardly.”

“C’mon, Cas! Save a horse, ride a cowboy!” Jo chimes in.

“I think I would be the cowboy in this instance, if he is the bucking bronco,” Cas comments. Dean’s pulse quickens. Mmm, cowboys. Cas in a cowboy hat. Mmm-mmm.

“All you need is a hat!” Charlie squeals.

“Got it right here!” Ellen calls from behind them. She takes a felt cowboy hat decoration off the wall and strides over, then plops it on Cas’ head. “Get ridin’, cowboy.”

“You’re all terrible,” Cas mutters, adjusting the hat on his head but not taking it off.
Cas is as hot as Dean expected him to be. Before he loses his nerve, Dean calls with a lazy twang, “C’mere, pardner. Or are you scared I’ll make you... spill all over your lap?”

Oohs and ahhs rise from the small crowd as Cas rolls his head, then shakes it. He strolls to Dean and straddles his legs, then sips his drink. They lock eyes. “I won’t spill a drop,” he rumbles, then, to Dean’s utter surprise, he sits on his legs and raises his feet off the floor. “Time us, Ellen. One minute. Let’s see this bronco buck.”

Their friends and family cheer them on as Dean masks his arousal behind a cocky smirk and starts bouncing his legs. Cas sips his white wine calmly from a stemless glass. Dean gives an extra-hard bounce just as Cas brings the glass up to his face again, sloshing it but not spilling it. Cas licks the wine off his lips, never taking his eyes off Dean, and it makes Dean feel a little drunk (though he’s only had a glass of wine himself). The challenge in Cas’ eyes makes him work harder, sweat collecting at his temples as he jostles the six foot man around. He’s gratified when Cas has to throw out his arms for balance and mortified when he feels himself hardening as Cas’ thick, muscular thighs tighten around his to help him hang on. The serious staredown Cas is giving him doesn’t stop until Ellen yells, “Time!”

Dean, exhausted and defeated, immediately slumps down in his chair. Cas, apparently not expecting that, loses his balance and tumbles onto the floor, the last of his drink spilling into his face, hair, and on the hat that falls off his head. On his feet as soon as he feels Cas fall, Dean leans down to help him up. Cas blinks the liquid out of his eyes, then bursts into laughter. The room roars with delight and good spirits, but Dean only has ears for Cas, who cleans himself up with a towel Gabe gives him and whispers into Dean’s ear, “Charlie was right.” Dean blushes as Cas walks away. Cas flirted with him. Christmas Miracle Number Two.

The party breaks up shortly after that, everyone needing to get home to rest before the busyness of Christmas Day. Dean drives the van home with Bobby, Sam and Allie following behind in their rental car. That night, he drifts into a sound sleep, happy at having his family together for the first time in a long while.

In the morning, Dean panics. “Bobby, shit, we didn’t get Santa gifts for Allie!” he whisper-shouts to his uncle as he’s getting him out of bed.

“Don’t worry, we got it covered,” Bobby says, unperturbed.

“What do you mean?”

“Cas and I went out and bought a few once Sam’s plans were finalized.”

“You...you did?”

“Well, yeah. Don’t want a kid wakin’ up on Christmas mornin’ with no gifts from Santa.”

“How long was this in the works?”

“I dunno,” Bobby says in his side-to-side head shrug. “After Thanksgiving? We called him one day while you were at work.”

Dean huffs and closes his eyes to stave off tears. “Whose idea was this?”

“Cas’. He wanted you to have your brother home for Christmas.”

“Fuck him, that damn son of a bitch.” Dean stops and turns away from his uncle, sniffling and wiping his eyes.
“Been waitin’ for you to,” Bobby says. Dean turns back to his uncle with a questioning frown. “Fuck him, that is,” he clarifies.

“Bobby!” Dean shouts, forgetting others are in the house as heat races through his body.

“Hush up, boy, and don’t act like I ain’t got eyes. I see you two together.”

“It’s not like that!”

“I know it ain’t just about sex, ya idjit. You two got something more between you. What’re y’all waitin’ for?”

Dean sighs as he lifts Bobby with the Hoyer. “I just…sometimes I think we have something, but I don’t know if I’m imagining it or not.”

“Well, I ain’t much for imagination, and I’m tellin’ you there’s something there.”

“I want there to be. I’m not sure how he feels about this kind of thing, though.”

“What kind of thing?”

“He works for us.”

“So what? Ain’t no law against having a thing between ya.”

He stays quiet as he places Bobby on the commode, then lifts him again and cleans him before placing him in his shower chair to take him into the bathroom. Once they’re in the bathroom with the door closed and the shower running, he picks up their conversation. “You know Cas. Being friends is one thing, and I have a feeling it took a lot of arguing with himself just to allow that to happen. But being boyfriends is something else, you know? If it works out, great, but if it doesn’t work out, I don’t know what would happen. I don’t think he would jeopardize your care, and I don’t wanna do that, either.”

“Yeah, well, I ain’t jeopardizing your chance to have someone good in your life to love, Dean,” Bobby says, his voice soft and hard to hear over the spray of the showerhead. “Home care people are a dime a dozen, but love, son, that’s hard to come by. You take that chance and you get yourself somethin’ good, somethin’ important. I want you to have your own life, son.”

Dean’s glad Bobby can’t see his face as he rinses his hair. He blinks away the dampness in his eyes. “Thanks, Bobby. I guess I’ll have to see if Cas is as interested as you seem to think he is.”

“Boy, he don’t wanna be, but he is. I see it. He didn’t sit on your lap for no reason last night. He’s conflicted. I dunno if it’s just his moral code gettin’ in his way or what, but keep at him.”

Dean’s not sure, either, but he’s more determined than ever to find out. If an old grump like Bobby sees something between them, there must be something.

Christmas morning is nothing short of magical. Dean forgot how exciting Christmas can be, but he remembers as he sees it through the eyes of his five-year-old niece. The Santa gifts are big hits, and Sam even remembered to eat the cookies they must’ve set out for Santa last night while Dean was getting Bobby to bed. Dean and Bobby had already mailed their gifts out, so Dean is surprised that there are more under the tree for the little girl from both him and Bobby. “Me and Cas wanted to make sure she had something here to open from us,” Bobby explains in a whisper as the paper flies. Dean smiles at all of the care and preparation his uncle and Cas put into this. There are a couple of extra gifts for Sam, too, and though his little brother’s face is lined with stress, he is clearly happy to
be here. Dean is relieved that he could offer Sam such a sanctuary, a peaceful oasis in his time of need. Just a few months ago, he probably couldn’t have. Safety, yes. Acceptance, welcome, of course. But peace? Probably not.

The ham dinner is consumed and Dean and Allie are on their second slices of pie (girl after his own heart) watching *A Christmas Story* when he thinks of Cas. He reaches for his phone and texts:

*To Cas 3:47pm: Merry Christmas*

*To Dean 3:47pm: And a Merry Christmas to you. How has your day been?*

*To Cas 3:48pm: Perfect. How about yours?*

*To Dean 3:49pm: Very nice, thank you.*

*To Cas 3:50pm: What are you guys up to? We’re watching *A Christmas Story*. Figured you might be too.*

*To Dean 3:52pm: We didn’t sleep in as planned, so we ate and watched the movie early and now I’m giving Jo and Charlie some time alone.*

Dean pauses. Alone? He lives there.

*To Cas 3:52pm: Where are you?*

*To Dean 3:57pm: Out and about.*

*To Cas 3:57pm: There’s nothing open. How are you out and about?*

Cas doesn’t answer after ten minutes, so Dean decides he’s being an evasive little shit. “Sam, you mind if I get out of here for a little while? Bobby should be fine.” He glances over at their uncle, asleep in his wheelchair.

“Sure, no problem. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just gonna see Cas for a bit.”

Sam smirks at him. “Say hi to your boyfriend for me.”

Dean makes a face at him and slips into his coat. “Allie, feel free to play with all the loud toys we got you, okay? Make *lots* of noise for your dad.” He grins at his brother before grabbing his keys and heading out the door.

The ugly Continental is exactly where he thought it would be. He parks his beautiful Impala next to it and knocks hard on the front door, but no one answers. Scooting to the back, he tries the door that leads into the alley. Cas cracks it open, then swings it wide when he sees Dean. “Is something wrong?” he asks.

“Yeah, you’re alone on Christmas.”

“So? Maybe I want to be.”

Dean scrutinizes Cas’ tired blue eyes. “No, you don’t.”

Cas sighs and lets him into the bakery. There’s loud, not-Christmas music playing from an old radio covered in flour dust. “This isn’t very festive,” Dean points out.
“I’m making cookies, does that count?”

Dean looks across the wide table at the ingredients and bowls. “Are they Christmas cookies?”

“I’m making them on Christmas, so yes. Which means that my music is Christmas music, too.”

“Damn you and your logic.”

“What can I say? Mama didn’t raise no dummy. So did you really come all this way on Christmas Day just to see me?”

He could come up with some sarcastic retort, but says simply, “Yes.”

The sincerity seems to set Cas off-kilter. “Oh. Well, thank you. Would you like to help?”

Dean agrees. He washes his hands and they set to work rolling the dough.

“Man, I love Christmas songs,” Dean jokes as the heavy guitar of “Hells Bells” begins.

“It has bells. It’s practically the same thing as ‘Carol of the Bells,’ don’t you think? Festive.” Cas nods his head to the music and starts singing. Dean’s never seen him quite so…himself, he supposes. Comfortable, like when he danced with Charlie in this same kitchen. Coupled with the bronco thing from last night, maybe Cas is finally relaxing around him.

“Time to cut the dough into shapes,” Cas decides. “What would you like to make?”

“I dunno. What were you going to make?” He looks around and doesn’t see any cookie cutters. Cas bites his lip subtly and looks reluctant to say anything. “C’mon Cas, what?”

“If you want the truth, I was going to make suggestive shapes,” he admits. “Just for the girls and me, not for…sale.”

“Suggestive shapes, huh? Are we talking dicks here, Cas?”

“For me, yes. And Jo, if she wants.”

Dean stares at Cas for a moment, then his mouth curves into a wicked grin. “Let’s do it.”

The men laugh as they cut out the X-rated shapes, throwing out things like “Should I make this life-size, Cas?” and “Oh, cut and uncut. Nice variety, Dean.” Cas shows him how to make a vulva by layering pieces. “ Didn’t know you’d have such an extensive knowledge of this, Cas,” Dean comments.

“Well, I am a nurse. Though this will be the first time I eat one in a long time, I admit.”

Dean turns and stares at him. “Thought you were gay?”

“I am, but it took me some time to figure that out. I was a lot more indiscriminate in my youth.”

“Looking for love in all the wrong places?”

“Just looking for love, I suspect.” The mood becomes somber until Cas says, “But I wasn’t going to turn down what was offered.” He smiles and winks, making Dean laugh. Dean admits to a brief bit of experimentation himself, and the mood becomes lighter again, though Dean doesn’t forget Cas’ words.
“I thought you told me you weren’t really a baker,” Dean comments as they slide the trays into the oven.

“I’m not, but I thought it seemed like a traditional thing to do on Christmas. Not that I’d know much about that personally. Those aren’t the kinds of Christmases I had.”

The easiness of their conversation and Cas’ openness makes Dean brave enough to ask, “What were your Christmases like?”

“Not great,” Cas admits. “They were better when I was with people other than my mom, but they still felt…empty, I guess. Maybe not empty, but something like that.”

“Lonely.”

“Yes, lonely seems like the right word.” Dean watches as Cas flits to the coffeemaker and brews a couple of cups, handing one to Dean. They lean against a counter as they wait for the cookies to bake.

“You said before that you took care of your mom. What was wrong, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Cas sighs and says, “She had Schizoaffective Disorder. It’s like Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder in one. She had lots of delusions, altered mood states. It made the holidays…difficult.”

Dean had no idea things had been so tough for him. “Sounds like it made every day difficult,” he offers.

“Some days were better than others, but most of them weren’t great. It took a long time for her to be diagnosed, and she wasn’t med-compliant. Add that to us basically living on our own and barely scraping by because my so-called father was gone so much and…well, like you said, every day was difficult. When I wasn’t watching her, I was trying to go to school or trying not to get caught stealing food or money.”

Dean’s heart aches for the little boy Cas was. “That’s…wow, I can’t even imagine.”

“You probably can. You told me you had to go into the bars to drag your father home, and you took on a lot of responsibility.” Dean nods. He could relate there. “Same sort of thing for me, just a different cause. Though she did drink, too. That was almost better sometimes, because it seemed to quiet her mind for a while.”

“So those hospitalizations you mentioned before, those were…”

“Psychiatric, yes.”

Dean shakes his head. “Can’t even tell you how many times my dad was in and out of detox and rehab, shit. Nothing ever seemed to work, at least not long-term. Just when I’d think he was gonna make it, he’d relapse. Sucked. As a kid it was hard. I had to try to make Christmas good for Sammy, you know? ‘Course, I couldn’t do much, but I tried. Once Bobby and Karen came along, life was a lot better. Not ideal, but better.”

“The power of a chosen family,” Cas says with a tiny curl of his lips. “That was Missouri for me, I suppose.” Cas had told him about his neighbor during one of their evenings after Bobby went to bed. He shakes his head and sips his coffee as he stares straight ahead.

“I’m thankful as fuck we had Bobby and Karen,” Dean says. “But I never really had the chance to choose any other family, you know? Like, a family of my own making, I guess. I didn’t let people
too close ‘cause of my father’s shit. Last thing I wanted was people knowing about him and then knowing me and making assumptions. Tried a few boyfriends, but nothing stuck. I used to think I could just power through, that I didn’t really need anyone. By the time I realized I did, Sam was gone, Aunt Karen was gone, and I was a guy with two full-time jobs, one at work and one at home. It was too late by then.”

“It’s not too late, Dean.”

“I know that now. But I didn’t, for a long time. You helped me realize that, you know.” Dean nudges him and gives him a warm, sincere smile when Cas raises his eyes to meet his. “Do you believe it’s too late, Cas?”

“For you to choose a family? Of course not.”

“Not me. You.”

“Oh.” His throat bobs as he licks his lips. “Probably too late, yes.”

He watches Cas, a fierce determination growing in his belly and his heart. No way is this man, who’s given so much of himself, going to believe there’s no family for him. Not with Dean around. He turns to stand in front of him, leaving little space between them. “It’s not too late. I’m gonna help you realize that.”

Cas’ warm blue eyes are as sad as Dean’s ever seen them. “I can’t—” he starts, but the timer on the oven beeps.

“Hold that thought,” Dean says, a finger to Cas’ lips. He thinks he knows what Cas was going to say, and he won’t let him. “We have naughty cookies to eat. I wanna see what you can do with icing.”

Cas smiles under Dean’s finger. “Mixing extra milk into the confectioner’s sugar will give you that realistic jizz look every baker wants.”

“Cas, you dirty son of a bitch. Show me.” The men cackle and dance around the kitchen as they decorate cookies. Christmas Miracle Number Three: Cas lets down his guard.

And after packing the cookies and grabbing dinner together at the only place in the area that’s open, Dean goes home and experiences Christmas Miracle Number Four. Well, it’s not a miracle in and of itself. But it does lead to miraculous things.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for:
- Discussion of substance abuse
- Discussion of significant mental health symptoms
- Child neglect
- Theft

Referenced in this chapter:
Miracle on 34th Street, movie
Black Mirror, Netflix
A Christmas Story, movie
“Hells Bells,” AC/DC

Next chapter: Roommates and revelations.
The phone call surprises Cas out of his quiet musings about his time at the bakery with Dean—time that was dangerously wonderful, despite his dour mood when he’d arrived. “Hello?”

“Hey Cas, this is Sam, Dean’s brother?”

“Yes, of course, what can I do for you?”

“Oh, just thought you’d want to know that I’m with Dean in the Emergency Department.”

Cas’ heart drops into his gut. He just saw him! Despite his internal panicking, he falls into his professional persona. “What happened, Sam?”

“I found him outside. He misstepped on the stairs on the side of the house and fell.”

*Concussion? Fracture?* “Is he alright?”

“They’re taking X-rays soon. He’s in some pain but I think he’ll be okay.”

“Alright. I’ll be right down.” Castiel hangs up and slips his coat on.

“What’s going on?” Charlie asks, looking up from her spot on the couch. Jo is sleeping against her, the darkness and the drone of the TV lulling her under.

“Dean fell. He’s at the ED,” Cas explains.

“Oh no! Hang on, we’ll come with you.”

“No, no,” he says, keeping her seated with a hand on her shoulder. “I don’t think he’ll be there all that long. Stay home. You’ve had a long day. If he’s staying, I’ll call you.”

“Alright. But let me know.”

“I will. Promise.” He gazes at her eyes, the lines and the dark circles the evidence of the toll this Christmas Day has taken on her. She and Jo both crawled into bed with him around 4:00 a.m., Charlie overwhelmed by grief over her mother and Jo afraid of Charlie’s grieving, not knowing quite what to do with it. Castiel held Charlie for a while as she cried, then turned her to her girlfriend’s arms when she calmed a bit and encouraged them to seek comfort in each other. He held them both until the sun came up. “You doing okay?” he asks.

“Yeah. I should probably get to bed early tonight. Gotta work in the morning.”

“Yes. Jo staying tonight?”

“I think so.”
“Good.” He kisses her head. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Unless something’s really bad, then you’ll call me.”

“Yes, dear.” He ruffles Charlie’s hair, then Jo’s, before he leaves.

The ED is busy tonight, the waiting area full of victims of viruses and Christmas mishaps. He gives Dean’s name and they lead him to Dean’s room, Triage 12. He hears Dean moaning quietly as he turns the corner. Dean is in the bed, looking almost as white as the sheets he’s on. Sam stands by his side and Allie is in the corner of the room, playing with a few plastic dogs she got as part of a play set from Santa.

“What’re you doin’ here, Cas?” Dean asks before looking at Sam, seeming to figure it out on his own. “You didn’t need to call him, Sam.”

Cas interrupts Dean before he can get too far into his scolding of his sibling. “I’m glad he did. How are you feeling?”

“Hurts,” he grumbles.

Cas moves to the foot of his bed and eyes his very swollen foot. He frowns, then moves to Dean’s head and looks into his eyes. “May I touch you?” he asks. When Dean gives his consent, Cas smooths a hand over Dean’s face, taking in the scrapes, then takes his hand and holds it. Dean closes his eyes, his breath steadying. Touch often reduces people’s perception of pain and helps them cope with it more effectively. He sees Sam in his periphery, smiling softly.

The nurse comes in to check on Dean and to let him know that an aide will be by shortly to take him to X-ray. Castiel takes her aside and grills her about Dean’s condition and treatment.

“Cas, leave her alone and come back here,” Dean murmurs. Castiel returns and dutifully perches at his side, taking the hand Dean wiggles at him.

A couple of hours later Dean leaves the hospital in a walking boot, the result of an avulsion fracture in the fifth metatarsal caused by twisting his ankle when he took the icy stairs wrong. “What the fuck am I gonna do?” he gripes as Cas guides him into his precious Impala. It feels wrong to see him in the passenger seat.

“About?”

“About Bobby, work, myself… Christ, I’m a mess. I’m gonna have to hire more help at home, fuck, I can’t interview—”

“Dean, stop panicking. I’ll help you.”

“I’m gonna need someone around in the morning, Cas, I can’t—”

“As I said, I will help you. Get all of your grumbling, complaining, and refusals out on your ride home with Sam, because I don’t want to hear them.” Cas swings the door closed and walks away, leaving Dean to sputter on his own. He follows them back to the house, where Bobby is still up watching TV and waiting.

“Damn fool,” Bobby says, his eyes not able to hide his worry over his nephew despite his gruff words.

“I’m alright,” he mutters. Cas and Sam guide him to the couch. Allie follows and is standing to the
side, not quite knowing what to do. Cas recognizes the scared, helpless look well.

“Hey, Allie?” he says. He’s not all that comfortable with kids, but then he never felt like much of a kid himself and didn’t relate well to the other kids when he was. He knows, though, that a gentle voice and something to do will help ease her fears. “Would you do me a favor? Would you get your Uncle Dean some water?” He gets her a cup from the cabinet. “Get the water from the bathroom sink so you can reach.” She nods and retreats, returning with a cup of water that is filled to the brim. Droplets on the sides hint at a spill or two as she walked. He makes a mental note to clean them up. “Thank you, Allie.” He offers the cup to Dean, who is now seated on the couch.

The men discuss the plans for the evening. Sam feels comfortable assisting Bobby and Dean overnight, so Castiel tells them he’ll come back in the morning to get Bobby up for the day. Dean looks guilty and Sam looks relieved. Cas assists Bobby with his nighttime routine, then takes some blankets and pillows from the linen closet and lays them on the couch.

“What’re you doin’, Cas?” a sleepy Dean asks. The pain meds are working.

“You won’t be able to get upstairs to your room. You’ll have to sleep here for a while. Lie down. We have to get your clothes off you. Allie, would you please come with me? Sam, help him get undressed. Allie and I will look for pajamas for him.” He leads Allie to Dean’s bedroom, which he’s never been in before. He doesn’t take the time to look around tonight. “Find me a nice warm pair of pants for Uncle Dean to sleep in, okay?”

“Oh, she agrees. She finds some in the fourth drawer of the dresser. Cas finds a t-shirt and a sweatshirt that should be suitable. He has no idea what Dean wears to bed. He doesn’t find true pajamas, and Dean usually wears comfortable pants and t-shirts on Sunday Fundays, so perhaps he sleeps nude, too, or something close. He tries not to think about it too much.

“Alright, I’m going to bring these to your uncle, okay? Stay in here or in your room until someone comes for you. I don’t think you want to see your uncle in his underwear.”

She scrunches her face. “Eww, no! But you have to,” she giggles, seemingly delighted in the disgust she’s certain this will bring him.

“Eww, you’re right. I’ll close my eyes,” he chuckles. She stays put and Cas brings Dean his clothes, not closing his eyes but averting them. Dean is attractive, obviously, but right now he’s in pain and Cas wants to make him comfortable, not ogle him. They help him with his pants, moving him as needed to get them over his hips. When that’s finished, Cas gets him some water and tucks the covers around him, then makes his way to the door to leave. Dean’s voice stops him.

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean murmurs groggily. “I’m glad you showed up.”

Cas’ mind flicks back to a determined Dean outside the door of the bakery just hours ago, showing up for him just so he wouldn’t be alone on Christmas. Dean had been right. He really hadn’t wanted to be alone. He wanders back to Dean’s side. They’re by themselves, Sam having trotted upstairs to tend to Allie. He sits for a moment. “I was happy to show up for you. Thanks for showing up for me today, too.” Hesitantly, he reaches his hand out to Dean, who grasps it tightly in his until it slackens in sleep. Touch is important for healing. Whose healing he’s thinking of, he’s not sure.

Weariness settles in Cas’ bones as he drives home. He slinks into the house and to his room, setting an alarm for a much-too-early wake-up, and falls into a dreamless sleep.

Slogging into the kitchen mere hours later, Jo greets him with a grunt and a cup of coffee. “My kingdom I bequeath unto you,” he mutters, inhaling the nutty, bitter scent before he takes a sip.
“Mornin’, hubs,” she mutters back. “Charlie’s in the shower. How’s Dean? She mentioned he went to the ED?” Cas is surprised to get so many words from Jo all in a row. Mornings are difficult for her. She must’ve been up for a while.

“Yes. I’ll tell you both about it when she comes out.”

“She’s been out a long time.”

“Ugh, no gay jokes, Jo. Too early. I don’t have any witty comebacks until after my first cup.”

“You men are so into your comebacks. You given Dean a comeback yet, or is he not into that?”

“Stop making comeback a dirty word.”

“If no one’s made a gay porno called Comeback Mountain, I am. That shit would make me rich.”

“Jo.” He chuckles despite himself. The reference to Brokeback Mountain makes him think of cowboys, which makes him think of riding Dean like a cowboy the other night, and now he’s wondering how the hell sweatpants can feel tight. He groans in frustration and rubs his eyes as he adjusts himself in his chair and strives to move this conversation along. “Are you eating cookies for breakfast?”

“Don’t judge. And hey, there’s no wrong time to eat pussy.”

“Ugh, Jo.”

“You want one?”

Cas pauses, then sticks his hand out and waits for her to press a cookie into it. He peers at it when he feels its weight. “Pussy. How disappointing.”

Jo cackles and gives him a penis cookie, taking the vulva away from him and licking the frosting with an obnoxious moan. Cas snorts, then dips his cookie into his coffee.

“Ouch, dude. That’s gotta hurt.”

“It’s my kink.”

“Hope you’re not gonna do that to Dean’s dick.”

He swats lazily at her. “Stop it.”

Charlie slides into the kitchen in stockinged feet and ruffles Cas’ hair, then kisses Jo deeply. Cas focuses on his penis cookie and tries not to feel sorry for himself.

After helping out at the bakery for a couple of hours, he heads to Bobby and Dean’s place. Dean is fully awake and staring at the ceiling. Cas greets him, giving him the remote to the TV before starting the coffeemaker. He ducks into Bobby’s bedroom to let him know he’ll be in shortly, then readies the coffee for Dean and helps him sit up to drink it. “Careful, it’s still hot,” he cautions.

“Yes, dear.”

Cas rolls his eyes and heads into Bobby’s room. “So, tell me what you do in the morning.”

They take each part of his routine step-by-step, from the exercises to the commode to the shower. They talk quietly about how Bobby enjoyed his Christmas, the gruff older man telling Cas it was the
best one in a long time. Cas’ heart feels buoyant. He’d wanted Sam and Allie to come for Christmas for Dean, but he’d wanted them here for Bobby, too, and even for Sam, a man he hadn’t met before. Seeing Bobby smile like this is something Cas has worked hard for.

By the time they make it into the living room, Dean has finished his coffee and is struggling to stand up. Cas pushes him down with one finger. “I don’t want you walking around today,” he admonishes him.

“I have to go to work.”

“Not today you don’t, sorry.”

“I have to.”

“Nope. Today you rest. You and Bobby can watch soap operas.” Bobby snickers behind him as Dean scowls.

“I don’t wanna stay home.”

“And I’m sure your employees don’t want to pick you up off the floor,” Cas retorts. He ignores Bobby muttering something about an old married couple. “You will help your healing significantly if you stay off your foot for a few days. The pain should subside quite a bit after that, and you can go back as tolerated.”

“It’s a walking boot, Cas. That means I can walk.”

“Yes, and you should, but you should start that around here, not in an area with several hazards that could ultimately lead to greater injury. Give yourself a few days.”

“I should—”

“Trust your employees and let go of your guilt, Dean. Besides, your brother and niece will be here the rest of the week. Take time to enjoy them.”

Dean folds his arms. “What happened to patient choice and all that?”

Cas sighs, rolling his eyes. “Fine. If you choose to go to work, all you have to do is get there.” He pointedly glances out the window at Dean’s car, then back at Dean.

“I can call an Uber, you know,” Dean snipes.

“Of course, go right ahead,” Cas says. “I believe your phone is upstairs in your room.”

“I can call a cab on the house phone.”

“Sure. Get the phone book. Oh, you don’t have one. You use your phone to look numbers up. Which is upstairs.”

Dean scowls. “I can get Sam to drive me.”

“Unlikely. He’s more likely to listen to the nurse in the home than the stubborn ass.”

“Aren’t they one and the same?”

The heat of their standoff dissipates as Bobby cackles, followed in short order by Cas and then Dean. “That was pretty good, I have to say,” Cas grins. Dean’s eyes light up with a dangerously addictive
“Put on that nurse’s outfit, Cas, and he might have a reason to stay home,” Bobby offers. Bobby’s shit-eating grin and Dean’s confused, intrigued expression are just enough for Cas to go there, where he knows he shouldn’t go (but he went there once already with the bronco thing, and they’re friends, so what the hell?).

“The Naughty Nurse’s outfit with the fishnets, Bobby?” he asks, a hip cocked toward him as he leans down to speak to him confidentially. “I only pull that out for good patients who follow their nurse’s advice.”

Dean, interestingly, stops fighting and flops back on the couch. “Fine,” he sighs dramatically. “Help me put my foot back up, then.”

Chuckling, Cas saunters over to Dean with a purposeful swing in his hips. He props Dean up with a pillow under his head, then lifts his foot with more pillows. He fetches a glass of water and pain medication, which Dean gulps without argument. “Such a good patient,” he murmurs, then winks, leaving Dean gaping before attending to breakfast.

He shouldn’t be teasing Dean. He really, really shouldn’t. Dean is off-limits, because of ethics and… other reasons. But the devil on his shoulder tells him that Dean is his friend, and he flirts with his friends. Some of them. His female friends. He hadn’t stopped to consider that before. But it’s too late now, the words are out there. Still, it might be confusing. At the bakery yesterday, they were… intimate. Not sexually, though that tension was in the air (how could it not be when they’re making suggestive cookies?), but emotionally. Dangerous territory. It’s fun, this flirting, but it could lead to misunderstandings. He really shouldn’t.

“So, do you really have a little nurse outfit with stockings?” Dean asks that night when they’re alone, the house quiet and the hour too late for Castiel to still be hanging around. They turned off the TV a while ago and have been listening to music playing low from Dean’s iPad.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“I would.”

“I might.”

“I’m interested.”

“I bet.” They share a chuckle. Castiel adds, “You should be. I’m pretty hot.”

“I know.”

Dangerous, dangerous. “I…can’t, you know.”

“No?”

“No. Ethics.”

Dean is quiet for a while, and Cas thinks he’s going to drop the topic when he says softly, “There’s something between us, though, isn’t there?”

All of the feelings he’s tried to deny come bubbling to the surface. Sighing, he admits, “Yes.”

“Okay.”
Cas isn’t sure what he’s saying okay to, and he doesn’t dare ask. He figures that later, if it bites him in the ass, he can plead ignorance.

Between the bakery, Bobby, and Dean, Cas’ days and evenings are busy, and he’s exhausted from the shuttling back and forth. Sam leaves a few days after Christmas, and the exhaustion only intensifies. He’s doing more now, and he’s feeling the stretch. He hasn’t told anyone, but Bobby notices.

“Hey, Cas?” he says one evening when he’s assisting him with his evening routine.

“Hmm?”

“I was thinkin’ you could stay here if you want.”

Cas pauses. “What?” he asks. He lowers Bobby to his bed to change him, waiting out the spasms when he’s laying on the flat surface.

“Don’t play dumb. You heard me the first time,” Bobby says once his body has stilled.

“I…I don’t know if I should.”

“Why not? It would make your life a hell of a lot easier, less travelin’ around.”

“Yes, but…” What can he say, really? It’s not like he hasn’t set the precedent. He’s still living with his precedent.

“It would help us out a lot.”

Cas appraises Bobby’s expression. He’s not sure if Bobby is playing at something, but he sure knows what to say to pull at Cas’ heartstrings. “If Dean’s amenable, sure.”

Dean is amenable, so Cas breaks the news to Charlie. To soften the blow, he suggests a trial period for her and Jo to live together. As it turns out, though, softening the blow isn’t necessary. Charlie squeals with delight. He’s not sure how to feel about it. He smiles at her enthusiasm but can’t help feeling guilty that he has, perhaps, been an intruder, or at least a guest who has overstayed his welcome. Why didn’t he think of this before? He thought he was being a good friend to Charlie, staying through her grief and helping with the bills, but perhaps not. He’s cursing himself for his inconsiderateness when Charlie climbs in his lap and hugs him.

“I’m going to miss you so much, but I’m so happy for you, too! This will give you more time with Dean! You guys could really take a crack at this thing!”

“That’s not what this is about—”

“I know, but you could!”

“I can’t—”

“Cas, you can. You just have to let yourself. Your ethics argument sucks.” When he doesn’t say anything, she adds, “He’s not Jonathan.”

“I know, but it’s a similar situation.”

“Only on the surface. If you look deeper, you’ll see that it’s not.”

He doesn’t have the energy to argue, so he hooks his chin over her shoulder and holds her tighter.
Over the weekend, he moves a few things to Dean and Bobby’s, leaving most of his things at Charlie’s. When it's time to move back, he'll make decisions about his permanent living arrangements then. Living with Dean and Bobby is a temporary thing.

At least that’s what he tells himself.

Of course, he tells himself lots of things.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe admitting feelings isn’t a Christmas miracle...but it sure feels like it for our boys. ;D

Next chapter: The tension builds...
"You will need to be persistent and you will need to be bold. If you let him decide everything, he will decide to be alone."

You get this super early today because I'm on vacation and that pesky work thing isn't getting in the way! (So why am I up so early? Ugh.) Hope you have a beautiful day! <3

He didn’t realize an injury could be a Christmas miracle, but apparently it can, because his injury brought Cas into his house to stay for the last six weeks.

Six weeks of early morning Cas, rumpled and groggy.

Six weeks of Cas not leaving at the end of the night.

Six weeks of arguing over stupid shit because they’re both independent, hard-headed asses (and then laughing about it after).

Six weeks of Dean’s outrageous flirting and Cas’ rebuffs and, eventually, his reluctant and then more enthusiastic participation.

Six weeks of feeling like he’s not in this alone.

And now, it’s over. His foot is back to normal, and he can handle Bobby on his own once again. There’s no need for Cas to live here anymore, yet Dean will be damned if he’s gonna say a word to Cas about leaving. There is Bobby, though. Bobby might. And there’s Charlie. Charlie might.

Tonight, Charlie is coming over for dinner. He arrives home from work at the same time that she pulls into his driveway, so he waits for her. “Hey, girl,” he smiles, his arm outstretched for a hug.

“Hey, Deanie Beanie! How was your day?” She fits herself under his arm and squeeze his middle.

They chat as they head inside. For a moment he thinks about asking her not to say anything to Cas, but he knows that would be selfish of him. She might need the income he brings into the household, or she might need his help more frequently at the bakery (he’s cut back his hours there since the accident), or she just might want him around. He can’t blame her for that one.

As they sit down to eat, Dean fills the silence with the goings-on of his day at work. He hopes that if he fills enough time, no one will bring up Cas leaving. He does have to take a drink eventually, though, and that’s when Charlie speaks up.

“Sooooo,” she says, “I’m gonna ask Jo to marry me on Valentine’s Day.”

Dean is stunned, though he really shouldn’t be. Bobby looks just as surprised, and Cas is smiling widely and standing up. Clearly, he’s not surprised at all. He picks her up and swings her around, then kisses her cheek before setting her on the floor. Dean gathers his wits about him then and does the same. Bobby calls for her and she throws her arms around his neck; he leans his head into hers.
“It’s about time,” Cas says with a fond, teasing grin when they’re all seated again.

“Yeah, I know, but with Mom and all of that I just wasn’t ready. Now that the anniversary is past, I feel like I’m ready to move forward.” That day, just a couple of weeks ago, was a tough one. They had a house guest that night, Charlie seeking out Cas’ solace. Dean knew what losing a mother was like, and he’d felt horrible for her. He also felt a little jealous that she was sleeping with Cas, which he knew was ridiculous and made him feel like a prick.

“I’m so happy for you,” Cas smiles. His eyes are glowing with affection, a look that Dean has seen pointed his way more and more. He loves it. When he points that same look back at Cas, it always makes the tough military nurse shy and soft. He loves that, too.

“Me too!” she cries, clapping her hands. She excitedly tells them about the ring she purchased and her plans for popping the question. “Living together really solidified it for me,” she says. “Having her around, knowing she was coming home to me every night… it made me realize how much I want to be with her. I wasn’t sure, after mom. I was so tired for so long that committing to someone else…I wasn’t sure if I could. But thinking about not making that commitment hurt worse, you know?”

Dean nods. Cas nods, too, and Dean wonders how deeply the statement impacts him.

“Well, I’m very happy for you. And now you can have a proper guest bedroom again,” Cas says. “Or expand the kitchen.” Dean isn’t sure what he means until Charlie gasps and smacks him lightly on his bicep.

“You don’t have to move out! You always have a home with us!”

“No, it’s time. You need to have your life together as a couple. You don’t need a roommate.”

“But Cas, seriously…” she trails off, tears glistening in her eyes. “You’ve been there so much for me. You’re my family.”

“And now your wife will be there for you,” he reminds her with a soft smile. “She will be your family. This is a good thing, sweetheart. This is what I want for you. And hey, we’re still family even if we’re living apart. It’s not like you’re getting rid of me forever. I just won’t be stinking up the place with my testosterone.”

Dean feels his chest clench as Charlie hugs Cas long and tight.

Family. Cas needs family. It makes him more determined than ever to show Cas he still has a place, still has a family. He glances at Bobby, who nods.

“Hey, Charlie, don’t worry,” Dean speaks up. “Cas has a home right here. Sunday Funday won’t change a whole hell of a lot, alright? It’ll still be your place or mine… well, ours.”

Charlie’s somber mood quickly lightens. “Oh, Dean! Bobby! You guys are the best! You’re so lucky you get to have Cas!” she squeals. Dean knows very well how lucky they are.

“Thank you,” Cas says solemnly. “I’ll start looking, but in the meantime, I truly appreciate—”

“You ain’t gotta look nowhere, son,” Bobby says. “You have a home right here. We won’t make you stay if you don’t wanna, but we want you here. And not ‘cause you’re useful, but ‘cause you’re family to us. You got it?” Dean is relieved that he doesn’t have to have the argument with Cas and that Bobby feels the same way. Well, maybe not quite the same way, but the result is the same.

“Well, I will consider that, Bobby, and…thank you.” Cas offers a warm, grateful smile to Bobby and
That night, after Charlie leaves and Bobby heads to bed, Cas sits on the couch next to Dean as he usually does. He’s distracted, Dean can tell—Dean’s witty comments on the TV show they’re watching are only met with half-hearted grunts, and he’s rubbing his palms together. Dean wants to reach out and feather his fingers through Cas’ already-disheveled hair, offering what comfort he can for whatever reason Cas needs it. So he does. It’s soft and a little sticky from the hair junk he puts in every day, but it’s awesome anyway. Heat is radiating off the man, a warmth he’d love to curl into. “We can’t,” Cas says on a shallow exhale, though he doesn’t move. His eyes are closed so Dean can’t see whatever emotions are playing within them.

“Says you,” he says, not stopping his stroking. “Besides, I’m just trying to help you feel better. Touch is healing and all that, remember?” Cas shakes his head ruefully, probably because his words are being used against him. “You’re upset.”

“I’m worried.”

“About?”

“Living here.”

“Why?”

“I just don’t want to… complicate things.”

“Yeah, Cas, I know. Ethics.” Dean sighs and shakes his head, dropping his hand. “I think it’s bogus, but whatever. That’s not why I want you to stay. I want you to stay because you’re family, just like Bobby said. I think we could let more happen, but if you don’t want to, then you don’t.”

“It’s not th—um, okay. Thank you, Dean.”

Dean lets the rest of Cas’ unfinished comment lie, for now. Instead, he says, “Doesn’t mean I’ll stop flirting with you.”

“Big surprise.” Cas allows himself a tiny smile, then adds, “That’s not… confusing to you?”

“Nope.”

And it’s the truth. It might be confusing for Cas, but to Dean it’s not confusing at all. Dean knows what his feelings are, and he knows what Cas’ feelings are. It’s just going to take time and persistence to convince Cas that those feelings are worth paying attention to, that they as a couple are worth pursuing. Cas has been relentlessly persistent in his insistence that Dean do things for himself, and that insistence has ramped up even more now that they live together—Cas taking Bobby out so Dean can have time alone, sharing caregiving responsibilities even on weekends, and inviting Benny and Garth and a couple of his own friends over for cards every Friday or Saturday night since his injury. Dean’s going to be just as relentless. Cas needs something for himself. Dean wants to be that something.

So the flirting, the touching, and the heart-to-hearts continue, Cas under the impression that Dean knows the limits and Dean knowing the limits and pushing them one by one. He’ll never disrespect Cas, will never impose himself on the man if he truly doesn’t want him, but he has the feeling that Cas’ limits are fear-based and not a lack of desire. He would never push if it was a lack of desire. Fear, though, that he’ll challenge.

“Hey, hot stuff,” Dean teases when he walks into the kitchen one April morning. He’s returning
from a trip to the grocery store because they needed a few extra items for the party this afternoon. They’re celebrating Charlie and Jo’s engagement. Charlie had chickened out of the Valentine’s Day proposal, calling it “cliché” and denying that she, in fact, was scared that her unromantic, sometimes prickly girlfriend would say no. Cas had finally convinced her to do it last weekend, reminding her that her girlfriend was not a cactus, but a baguette, soft inside her crusty exterior. Charlie made her a French-themed dinner and proposed on one knee, and Jo cried.

“Hey, stud,” he replies easily. “You got the peppers?”

“Yes, dear.” He takes three peppers out of the grocery bag and starts juggling them.

“I had no idea you had such skill.”

“I got all the skills, baby,” Dean grins.

“So you keep telling me.”

“Hey, I’m willing to put my money where my mouth wants to be.”

“I don’t want money all over my dick. Money is crawling with germs.”

“Sweetheart, with my skills, you’d be throwing money at me.”

“Well, I do have a lot of pennies to get rid of.”

Dean breaks into squealing, nose-scrunching laughter at the jab, Cas following behind him. Bobby, supervising the making of his late wife’s famous quiche, rolls his eyes and mutters under his breath.

The party is not something Dean would’ve imagined happening here several months ago. Then again, he didn’t have friends several months ago. Now, he looks around the room at his ever-widening circle: Charlie and Jo, Ellen, Zar and Gabe (Cas’ friends technically but they’ve been over for cards enough that Dean considers them his, too), Giulia and Sofia (Cas took him back to their restaurant again and they hung out in the kitchen with sample plates of everything), Benny and Andrea, and Garth and Bess. Love for these people, for the world, for life fills his heart. He truly thought he’d be bitter and alone the rest of his days. Cas helped him figure out how to live for himself again.

“Thanks, Cas,” he leans over and whispers as Charlie and Jo are gushing about their “epic” love story (using nerdy analogies, of course, because otherwise it wouldn’t be Charlie) and their engagement.

“For…?”

He feels his throat tightening and pulls Cas into the hall, away from curious eyes. “All of it. Everything you’ve done. Getting me out of my own way, getting me to be with people again, let ‘em in. Lightening the load. Listening. Giving me family.” He swallows thickly.

“I didn’t do it for you,” Cas murmurs just for Dean to hear. He places a warm hand on his shoulder. “You deprived the world of the unique opportunity to experience Dean Winchester for too long. I couldn’t let that go unaddressed.”

Dean smiles softly at Cas’ teasing. “You’re too sweet. Gonna give me cavities.”

“Only if you eat me.”
They chuckle quietly, and it would be easy to fall back into the dirty jokes and brazen flirting, the talk that avoids what’s actually happening between them. But he doesn’t want to right now. “I really wouldn’t be as happy as I am today without you. I hope you know that.”

Turning serious again, Cas says, “You deserve it, Dean.” His thumb rubs tiny circles in Dean’s shoulder and he knows Cas’ door is open, just a crack.

“You deserve it, too, Cas. You deserve to be happy.” He places a hand on Cas’ hip and another on the back of his neck and inches closer as Cas’ breath stills. “You deserve a family and...and someone who wants to be with you. You deserve to have your own life, too, you know? To have someone take care of you sometimes, to bitch to when you’re having a bad day, to play with your hair and tell you it’s gonna be okay because you’re in it together.” Slowly, Dean strokes the hair at the back of Cas’ head. Cas leans into the touch before straightening up, blinking his eyes rapidly.

“You do, too. You could have that if you’d get out more like I keep telling you to do.”

Dean ignores Cas’ attempt to deflect and says, “I could have that if you’d let it happen.” He moves his hand from his hair to his jaw, the pads of his fingers sliding across the smooth skin.

Cas shakes his head slowly. “You could have anybody—”

“And I want you.”

“But I can’t.”

“Can’t? Or won’t?”

Dean watches the pain flutter through Cas’ eyes. “I won’t do that to you.” He breaks out of Dean’s hold and walks back toward the party. Dean stays in the hall a long time, breathing until he’s calm. You will need to be persistent and you will need to be bold. If you let him decide everything, he will decide to be alone.

Giulia’s words ring through his mind. He’s sacrificed a lot of things in his life, but he refuses to sacrifice this. He’s going to keep trying.

For days, weeks, he pushes at Cas—not maliciously, but with an insistence that tells Cas he won’t be ignored. It’s very similar to how Cas has pushed at him. Cas doesn’t seem to like having the tables turned, but Dean knows the feeling and he has no sympathy. Cas is uncomfortable because he’s being asked to challenge himself. There’s a tension in the house that’s no longer just playful, but also serious and passionate, burning hot under his skin and, he’s sure, under Cas’. Yet Cas stands strong, at every turn simply saying that his ethics don’t allow this sort of thing. So Dean decides to find out.

“Cas keeps referring to this ethics thing. He has some sort of professional code of ethics, right?”

“Yeah, I’d assume,” Bobby says. Cas is out with Charlie attending to some “Man of Honor” duties, so they are alone, having lunch at Sofia’s. Bobby finally agreed to come after a lot of badgering from Dean, Cas, Giulia, and Sofia. He had thought the place would be “too fancy” for him, but he’s enjoying it.

“Where would I find that?”

“I dunno. Don’t y’all Google everything these days?”

“Yeah, but I don’t really know what I’m looking for.”

“You know who might know? Meg.”
“Shit, I hadn’t thought of that.” Meg is a fellow nurse who still works at the hospital Cas left a few years ago. He’s met her a few times and, though she’s rough around the edges, she’s pretty cool. He messages her:

To Meg 12:22pm: Hey, it’s Dean Winchester, Cas’ friend. He works for my uncle. Do you know where I could find the code of ethics for nurses?

To Meg 12:24pm: I know who it is, doofus. Yeah, I know, why??

To Meg 12:25pm: You have such a sunny personality. No wonder you and Cas get along. I just need to know.

To Meg 12:26pm: You going to attack him with logic about his stupid idea that he can’t be with you?

Dean looks at the message, surprised. He assumed their relationship might’ve been discussed between Charlie and Jo, but not so much with Cas’ wider circle. Hmm.

To Meg 12:26pm: Essentially.

To Meg 12:26pm: Good.

Having the sarcastic nurse’s blessing feels good, in a strange way. He thanks her when the links come through, then shows them to Bobby. “Looks like I have some homework,” he grins.

That night, he pores through each of the codes of ethics that Meg sent him. Seeing nothing that prohibits them from having a relationship, he sends them to Charlie, Sam, and Gabe. He figures Cas’ best friend, his brother, and an attorney should all be able to help him see if he’s missing anything. None of them see a problem with it, either. He thinks this bodes well for his argument.

Armed with his ammunition, he confronts Cas the next morning, heading him off before he goes to help Bobby with his morning routine. Cas has never broken out of the habit since Dean’s foot healed, so now they trade days, Dean taking some mornings so that Cas can sleep after filling in an overnight shift at the hospice or so he doesn’t have to rush back after helping out at the bakery or just to give the guy a break, and Cas taking some mornings so that Dean can sleep in or go to work early. They really do work as a team.

“There’s nothing in here that says you can’t have a relationship with me,” Dean says without preamble.

Cas eyes the papers Dean is waving about. “In what?”

“In your codes of ethics. Any of ‘em. Pennsylvania ones, national ones. None of ‘em.”

Cas eyes the papers again, then Dean, but says nothing. Dean watches him swallow and shift on his feet.

“I read ‘em cover to cover, and I had other people look at ‘em. Nothing, Cas. So, what’s that mean for us?”

“Just because it’s not in there doesn’t mean it’s a good idea,” he argues quietly.

“It doesn’t make it wrong, either.”

Sighing, Cas says, “Perhaps not, but still.”
“Still what?”

“I don’t know. And it doesn’t matter, because you are my boss.”

“Okay, let’s not kid ourselves here, Cas. I’m not your boss. I called myself that at the beginning and you basically laughed in my face. And you know what? You’re right. Bobby’s your boss, not me. He’s the one getting the care. All I am is his advocate. So yeah, not your boss.”

“You defined the relationship that way.”

“Yeah, well, that was before you taught me I wasn’t. So, we good? Can we get past the boss bullshit and the ethics bullshit?”

“Like I said, just because it’s not in the code of ethics doesn’t make it a good idea.”

“Why not, Cas? I think that we”—he wags his finger between them—“are a good idea. Don’t you?”

Cas turns away, folding his arms and staring at the ground. “No.”

The sudden stab to his heart turns to hot anger. He takes Cas’ arm and turns him around. “Why? Am I not good enough for you?”

Pain turns Cas’ eyes into twin pools of turbulent waters. “What? No, I would never think that! Don’t say that about yourself, ever.”

“Then why? Is this about Benjamin and Jonathan?”

Those same liquid blues turn stormy. “How do you know about them?”

“Doesn’t matter. Is this about them?”

“Yes, it’s about them. So find someone else to care for, Dean Winchester. Someone who is much more deserving than me.” He stalks out of the room, leaving Dean more desperate for answers than ever.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Oh shit.
Cas hears the slam of the door mere minutes after their confrontation. Good. If Dean is angry, maybe he’ll drop this relationship topic once and for all. Cas is trying to decide if he’s angry, too. He’s not, he decides, not really. He’s just…baffled. What does he know about the Benji and Jonathan situations? Probably not much, especially not Benji. If he knew, he wouldn’t be so eager to pursue something with him. He takes a deep breath, then exhales harshly, pulling at his hair. It’s too early for this shit. He scrubs his face as he walks to Bobby’s room. “Morning, Bobby.”

“Mornin’.”

The routine begins quietly, and for that Castiel is grateful. He removes Bobby’s incontinence brief, assists him with the commode and shower, then returns him to his bedroom to dress and exercise. The exercises seem to go better after his shower, so they changed the routine up recently. He looks Bobby over automatically as he dresses him, checking for any skin breakdown, bruises, or other areas of concern. His mind records his observations with such practiced skill that his mind is able to float toward Dean. Again.

“It ain’t in there, you know. He scoured those codes, every last one of ‘em.”

Cas sighs and says nothing as he lifts Bobby’s leg to stretch it.

“He ain’t gonna give up.”

“He should.”

“What’ve you got up your ass about this whole thing, son?” Bobby asks, his voice gentler than his words. “Look, you can’t play games with me, alright? I ain’t blind, and I got nothin’ but time sittin’ in this chair. Most of my body may be shit, but my eyes are good and my brain still works at least half the time. I know what’s been happenin’ with you two. You and Dean got a thing for each other, and that’s a good thing. You both are good men who deserve good things.”

“He is, which is why I want him to have good things. I do not put myself in the category of ‘good things’ for him.”

“And why not?”

Cas smiles sadly and shakes his head. “I’ve already said too much,” he sighs.

“Well, you might as well spill the rest, then.” He stays quiet, hoping Bobby will get the message, but he either doesn’t get it or doesn’t give a rat’s ass because he continues, “Listen, I ain’t one for cryin’ in our tea together, alright? But Dean’s hurtin’, and you’re hurtin’, and I think this could all be solved if you stopped being so damn self-denying for a minute.”

“This is what I don’t want, Bobby. I don’t want you being upset with me or being upset for Dean. I
don’t want your care affected. I don’t want some dramatic shitshow with a client’s relative, and I
don’t want Dean to feel uncomfortable in his own home just because I don’t commit. I don’t want
complications.” He finishes with Bobby’s legs and moves on to his arms.

“Well, ain’t that a shame, princess?” Bobby huffs as Cas begins to rotate his arm. It says a lot about
the trust and rapport they’ve developed that Bobby will go right on arguing with him while he’s
helping him with his personal care, Cas thinks briefly. “Life is full of complications. You know that,
son. Your mama was crazy, your daddy wasn’t around, the army and the hospitals had all kinds of
rules. That was all complicated, yet you found a way to deal with it all.”

“I don’t want complicated anymore. I want simple.”

“You can have simple if you let yourself have it. You’re the one complicatin’ it. None of the rest of
us are upset because you don’t want this. We’re upset ‘cause you do and you won’t let yourself have
it. And your thing about not committin’? I don’t get that, boy. You’re one of the most committed
people I know.”

“Yes, well, look how far that’s gotten me. I commit, people leave. I don’t commit, people leave.
Everyone leaves. I can’t control that, but I can control my own commitment.” He moves around the
bed to stretch and rotate Bobby’s left arm.

“Funny how you say you don’t commit, ’cause you seem to be committed to that little redhead.”

“That’s different.”

“And her fiancée. And her mama.”

“Well—”

“And all those lady friends of yours.”

“But—”

“And me.”

“Those are all different.”

“You’re making ‘em different. They ain’t different ‘cept how you see ‘em.”

“Those relationships don’t require…” Cas sighs, trailing off. He doesn’t want to get into this. Cas
hooks up the sling under Bobby to the Hoyer lift. “I’m sorry, Bobby, I just can’t do this right now.”

Bobby gives him a sympathetic look, one he’d expect from a father. Not that he’d know. “Alright,
son. Listen, I’ll drop it for now, but I’m just sayin’ all this ‘cause I care about you, alright? And hey,
if I thought Dean was barkin’ up the wrong tree, I’d tell him so myself. But I don’t think he is.”

Nodding, Cas places Bobby in his chair and adjusts him until he’s comfortable. True to his word,
they don’t discuss it any further that day.

The next couple of weeks are awkward, to say the least. Bobby brings up the topic a few times, and
Cas listens but won’t go into anything. Dean, who he expects to be angry, isn’t, though he looks sad
and helpless sometimes. He keeps talking to Cas, not giving up even when Cas won’t talk back. He
still sits with him, still smiles at him, still touches him in ways that Cas both longs for and longs to
run away from. He wishes Dean would just move on, would just forget about falling for him. He
even tells him so. “I won’t,” Dean says every time. “Somehow, I’m gonna make you see we’re
worth it, Cas. I’m gonna break through your walls.”

*Good luck with that,* Cas thinks sullenly every time, even as a flicker of hope he doesn’t want to acknowledge burns within him.

It’s cards night tonight, a new habit he started when he moved in. He’s watched Dean blossom from the casual, friendly contact and competition. He’s not really sure if he should participate tonight, given his sour mood—both because of tomorrow and because his grocery run with Dean earlier had all the makings of a domestic romcom, with gentle touches and playful argument and teasing that threw a shitload of tinder on that little flame of hope he’s trying to extinguish—but he’s Bobby’s proxy.

“You don’t gotta,” Bobby assures him, as if he knows just what Castiel is thinking.

“No,” he exhales. “I want to.” And he does, because he wants Bobby to be able to participate. So Cas makes the queso dip and has Bobby ready and a light supper made by the time Dean comes home from helping Ellen install a new sink at the Roadhouse. He’s so handy and generous with his time, and it warms Cas’ heart even with the strange tension between them. Dean’s hand skates over his back as he thanks him for supper and again when he picks up the dishes. It sends tingles down his spine and...other areas. He wants him, no matter how much he denies it, denies himself.

It’s going to be a small group tonight, just Benny and Garth, since Cas’ friends are spending their Saturday night at a new bar. When the doorbell rings, though, he’s greeted by an extra face. Aaron is his name, and Benny explains he’s a friend and a frequent visitor to the garage, since he works at a local tire warehouse they use. “Dean said it’d be alright, brother,” Benny says.

“Of course. This is his house and his activity.” He shakes Aaron’s hand as he steps in.

“You live here, too,” Dean smiles as he approaches, side-eyeing Cas with a crooked grin that Cas tries not to find so damn sexy. Turning to Aaron, he says, “Hey, Aaron.”

“Hey,” the man says. Cas doesn’t miss the way the stranger’s eyes float up and down Dean’s body. A knot forms in his gut.

Gin Rummy is the game tonight, since Aaron doesn’t know how to play Poker and they played Blackjack last week. The three men of the household sit in their usual spots at the dining room table, Cas and Dean on either side of Bobby so they can take turns sitting out a round to help him. Aaron, since he doesn’t have a usual spot, takes Benny’s usual spot next to Dean, Benny on the other side of him, Garth between Benny and Cas.

Aaron is...touchy. Not in the sensitive, easily irritated way, but in the handsy sort of way. He brushes against Dean’s arm, lays his hand on his wrist to get his attention, nudges him with his shoulder. He leans in and says things privately to Dean, making him laugh nervously. His gaze lingers a little too long. Dean seems flustered. When it’s Dean’s turn to help Bobby with his cards, Aaron shows him his own hand and coyly asks for advice, his hand supporting his head as he leans against the table. The man isn’t subtle about his flirting.

Castiel should be happy about this. And he would be, if not for the fact that he hates it.

They take a break and Cas offers Bobby a drink while Dean goes to get more snacks. Aaron follows.

“You woulda made a hell of a sniper,” Bobby murmurs to him. “You ain’t lost sight of him since he walked in. Hell, if your eyes were weapons he woulda been dead long ago. You alright?”

Cas straightens up and takes a deep breath. “I’m alright,” he mutters. He stands and stretches. Benny
does the same, then wanders into the kitchen. Garth slides over to chat with Bobby. Cas sees an opportunity to escape for a few minutes. “Gonna hit the head. I’ll be back. You need to?”

“I’m good,” Bobby assures him, so Cas heads for the bathroom. When he’s finished, he gives himself a brief pep talk. This is what you want for him. Suck it up. He takes his own advice and sucks a breath in, then returns to the dining room for the next round.

Aaron continues his touchy-feely shit—but now Dean smiles at him rather than averting his eyes to his cards like before. His elbow touches Dean’s on the table and Dean allows the contact to remain rather than pulling away. Aaron jokes and Dean jokes back. Dean ruffles his hand through his hair, leaving it adorably messy the way Castiel likes it. It’s fine, he tells himself, swallowing the spit that’s pooling in his mouth. He’s starting to feel like a dog, snarling and salivating, pulling against an invisible chain. A chain he put there himself, incidentally. He vows to keep his eyes on the game, his attention to Bobby. But he can’t. He keeps looking at the two men, unable to focus elsewhere. He’s not the jealous type (to be so would be to acknowledge that you want something for yourself, to believe that you are worthy of it, and that you are, in fact, the rightful recipient), yet he’s probably looking a lot like The Hulk right now—green, growling, muscles contracted and ready to strike. You have to stop this. You were given the chance and you didn’t take it.

The flirting is becoming more blatant on Aaron’s part and even on Dean’s. Determined to get through this like the mature adult he’s been since he was eight, he focuses back on Bobby once again. Bobby isn’t focused on him or his cards, though; he’s focused instead on the three to his right, openly staring at them with squinted, assessing eyes. The look niggles at him. Bobby doesn’t seem to see the same thing Cas does, going by his expression, and that tells Cas that maybe he’s reading the situation wrong. He gets Bobby’s attention to take his turn and lets the game continue for a bit. Surreptitiously, after a particularly brazen hand to the middle of Dean’s shoulder blades, he glances up just as the three men cast their eyes his way. The others attempt to casually look away, but Dean’s eyes hold his for a second too long, and it all becomes clear.

“Fuck you, Dean, goddamnit,” Cas huffs. “Garth, would you mind?” He gestures at Bobby’s cards as he pushes away from the table and stands, not even waiting for a response before he stomps from the table in disgust and slams out the door.

Now you did it. If you hadn’t…and he didn’t…and maybe if tomorrow wasn’t…Doesn’t matter now, does it? You let it bother you, you let him see that he affected you. He curses himself for it, and more so for forgetting his car keys. He wants to just blow out of here. Not that his conscience would let him do that, of course. He’d at least want to check on Bobby first, even if it is Dean’s night to assist him to bed. He clutches at his hair and rubs at his face, feeling lost as to what to do next. Think. You always know what to do. Why can’t you think?

He’s about to start toward the woods behind the house to cool off when the door slams and Dean calls his name.

“Hey! What’s the matter?”

His tone is gentler than he expected. Was he wrong in assuming Dean was purposely trying to make him jealous? Uncertain where this is going, he decides to stand down. “I’m fine.”

“Then what was that all about?”

“Nothing. I apologize.”

“For telling me to fuck off? Apology not accepted, not until you tell me what your problem is.”
“It’s…you know what? I was wrong. I misread a situation that wasn’t mine to read in the first place, and I’m sorry.”

“Is this about Aaron?”

“It’s…sort of, but again, I was wrong and I’m sorry.”

“Wrong about what?”

“About…just about my read of the situation between the two of you and your actions toward me, that’s all. I’m very sorry.”

“Your ‘read of the situation,’ Cas? That he was paying attention to me and I was paying attention back? Not like we’re attached or anything. You don’t wanna date. What do you care?”

Dean’s tone has changed. It’s challenging, provoking…the fucker. “You know what, Dean? I take my apology back. Fuck you.”

“What?” he questions, trying to sound innocent. The tiny purse of his lips and nervous swallow give him away.

“You think you’re so damn clever, trying to make me jealous to change my mind.”

“I don’t get it, Cas. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is that you are completely ignoring some very real concerns I have, and you think that if you make me jealous that I’ll magically change my mind. It’s petty and heartless.”

“Heartless?”

“Heartless, Dean. You know I...feel things for you. Purposely making me feel jealous on top of all that is just cruel.”

“So you are jealous.”

Cas stares at him and growls low in his throat. Dean stares back, flushed, shallow breaths moving through slightly parted lips that he licks repeatedly. Cas is filled with rage and desire all at once and it pisses him off.

Then Dean shrugs and, biting at his lips, says, “You know, maybe I’ll make a real move. You’re the one who wants me to move on, and you seem to care more about your damn ethics and ex-boyfriends than me or whatever’s between us, so why would you give a shit?”

Castiel snaps, losing any semblance of control over his emotions or his words. There’s been too much between them, too many marbles rolling around in his head and his heart. Maybe that’s what the phrase means. He certainly feels like he’s losing his marbles. He sneers and pushes into Dean’s space until he’s backed him against the house. “Fine. Perhaps I’ll get some action tonight as well. Do you know what I like to do when I feel stuck with no way out, Dean? When I feel cornered? Frustrated? Hurt?” He leans in until his hot breath puffs over Dean’s mouth. “I like to fuck. So maybe I’ll go out and find myself a hot, dirty man with green eyes—someone who looks just like you—and I’ll fuck him until he screams my name. Or”—he presses his hands against the house on either side of Dean’s head, so close their chests touch—“maybe I’ll be the one to surrender. Maybe I’ll let him grind into my ass and mark me as his. Or hey, maybe we’ll take it nice and slow, touch every inch of each other’s bodies until we can’t take it anymore. Maybe we’ll even cuddle afterwards.” Dean is trembling, eyes desperately searching Cas’. Cas pushes himself off the wall and
steps back. “How’s that feel, Dean? Jealous?” He turns and walks into the house, leaving a stunned Dean standing alone.

Cas is shaking as he enters the house, skirting past everyone sitting in the living room in an awkward silence. They must’ve moved from the dining room to watch the argument out the window.

“Cas—”

“Save it, Benny,” he dismisses the man. He trots upstairs and hurriedly packs an overnight bag, returning to the living room a few minutes later.

Hesitantly, Aaron approaches. “Hey man, listen, I—”

“Were you in on this or do you truly have an attraction to Dean?”

He bows his head and admits, “I, uh, I was in on it. It was me and Benny’s idea.”

Castiel walks in measured steps toward Aaron until he’s looming over him. He arches a brow and addresses him with pursed lips and an intimidating set to his jaw. “Interfering in a situation you know nothing about is a dangerous game.”

“Dean didn’t even know at first—” Benny insists, approaching Cas and moving Aaron behind him.

His attention on Aaron broken, he scans the room for his phone and spits, “I said save it.”

Benny lays a hand on Cas’ shoulder as he tries to move past him to retrieve his phone from the end table. “But Cas, seriously, he cares about you so much, he—”

“Back the fuck off, right fucking now.” Benny drops his hand and moves away.

“Headin’ out, Cas?” Bobby asks casually, as if fisticuffs aren’t about to happen. Cas turns to him, taking a deep breath and releasing it before speaking.

“Yes, since it’s my night off I’m going to take advantage of it. You need anything before I go? Dean should be back inside in a minute.”

“Naw, I’m all set. Go take a breather, and tomorrow you two knuckleheads figure your shit out.”

“We’ll see about that. Night, Bobby.”

Cas passes Dean and ignores him as he climbs into his car, throwing his overnight bag in the passenger seat. He blasts his music as loud as he can stand it and peels out of the driveway, not caring who in the neighborhood bitches about it.

Son of a bitch. Fucking asshole. Why can’t he just let it go? Why can’t I?

If he truly didn’t care, then Dean trying to make him jealous wouldn’t bother him. But he does care. Way too much. He cares in ways he told Benji he wasn’t capable of. And he knows that Dean cares in ways Jonathan was never capable of, despite the dick move he made tonight.

He needs to forget. He needs to get beyond Dean Winchester before he gets in too deep.

He drives for miles, out of town, out of the next town and the town after that, until he gets to the bars and clubs of Philly. Here a man can forget about insane mothers, absent fathers, chaotic childhoods, partners who cared too much and didn’t care enough, people who left, people who didn’t but will because they all do eventually. Dean. Himself.
A light mist falls as he pays for his parking spot and walks into a club he used to frequent before he met Dean. Here he always found a means to forget, at least for a little while. And tonight, there are plenty of eager men willing to be those means. They’re drawn to him like sharks, surrounding him, smelling his misery like blood in the water. He dances with a few and pushes their hands off him, he rejects the alcoholic drinks and sticks with ginger ale and bitters, he sits through dumbass pickup lines and boring conversations that leave him cold. Just as he’s about to give up, though, a handsome man wedges beside him.

He’s charming and cute and affable, and he makes Cas smile even though he doesn’t feel like smiling. He’s smooth and refined, no rough edges to file down. There are no telltale ring indentations on his left hand and no strange vibe that he’s already taken. He seems gloriously easy, uncomplicated. So when the slightly shorter man with the pretty eyes of indiscriminate color leans in and asks him if he wants to meet up at his place just a few miles away, Cas pays his tab. He walks out of the club and to his car, the familiar rumble of the shitty thing comforting as he makes his way onto the street. Feeling right for the first time in hours, he drives until he reaches his destination, where he knows he’ll get exactly what he needs.

“Hey, hubby. I gotcha,” Charlie smiles, holding up a bottle of wine when he arrives at her door.

He drops into her waiting arms. It was the only place he could go, because there was no getting beyond Dean Winchester. He knew he was already in too deep.

Chapter End Notes

You knew something had to happen with these two...

Next chapter: Fighting the good fight. <3
“Well, screwed the pooch on that one, didn’t ya?” Bobby said to him last night, the only words the man said to him the rest of the night. The game broke up after Cas went tearing out of the driveway, the heavy guitar riffs blasting out his windows barely registering in Dean’s ringing ears. Benny and Aaron apologized profusely, but he didn’t blame them. It was his fault. He’s the one who went along with the jealousy plan once Aaron and Benny let him in on it in the kitchen during a break in the game. He was desperate for Cas to notice him, to do something to break the stalemate between them. And boy, did he break it.

Aaron hitting on him had really thrown him for a loop. He’s an attractive guy, but how much he didn’t want to engage with him told him how far gone he is on Cas. When Aaron followed him into the kitchen, he was going to let him down easy, tell him thanks but no thanks. But then Aaron apologized and explained that Benny had told him about the situation and they thought that maybe Aaron hitting on him would either make Cas so jealous that he’d do something about Dean or that Cas would be so unaffected that Dean would know for sure he didn’t have a chance. Apparently, Benny and the other guys were sick of Dean’s “moping” and “pining.” Assholes. When Benny came in shortly after, telling them he overheard the conversation between Cas and Bobby and he was convinced Cas was jealous, Dean decided to go along with it.

What a mistake, looking back.

He didn’t expect Cas to explode the way he did, didn’t expect him to stare at him so intensely or growl so deeply. He was nervous being in the path of Cas’ emotions, but incredibly turned on, too, his libido joining his nerves at the brink of his fragile sanity. He was affecting him. Cas did give a shit. He just needed a push. So Dean pushed, saying that maybe he’d make the thing with Aaron real, though he never meant it.

And oh, did that rile Cas up, enough for Cas to back him into the house and stand a breath away, pinning him there with his body. His blood raced through his veins, hot and pulsing. How many times had he pictured them just like this? But that blood froze when Cas said he was going to go out and fuck some rando. Sweat soaked his shirt, and he remembers shaking like the green leaves above him. How appropriate, given how green he felt both from jealousy and from the sickness burning in his gut. And when Cas called him out on it—“How’s that feel, Dean? Jealous?”—he knew he had, as Bobby so eloquently put it, screwed the pooch.

Dean finally throws the covers off and drags himself out of bed. He still has to attend to Bobby, and he’s a little late on that. He shuffles to the bathroom, then to Bobby’s room. Bobby is staring at the ceiling, his face blank. He says nothing to Dean.

“Look, I know I screwed up.”
“Gee, you think so?”
“I’m sorry! I was desperate! It was stupid!”
“Yeah, well, you ain’t gotta explain all that to me. You’d best be explainin’ that to Cas.”
“I’ll be lucky if the guy ever talks to me again.”
“He will, if only out of sheer stubbornness,” Bobby grumbles.

Dean’s brows knit together. “What? What do you mean, stubbornness?”
“I mean he’ll put on a good front and try to forget it all, or make you think he did, anyway.”

Dean thinks back to Thanksgiving, to when he questioned their friendship. Cas didn’t confirm it, but he hurt his feelings, he knows he did. And now he’s gone and done it again. Son of a bitch.

“He does that, doesn’t he?” Dean asks quietly.

“Yup. Stuffs those feelings away. Probably needed to, dealin’ with his mama all by himself. Kid grew up way too fast, faster than a boy should. You know, son.”

Yes. He does know. “I won’t let him stuff his feelings away,” Dean vows.

“Yeah, well, good luck with that.”

The rest of the routine is done in silence. Breakfast is silent, too, giving Dean much too much time to think about where Cas is now. Where he was last night.

“He told me he was gonna go fuck someone else,” Dean rasps after Bobby asks him why the hell he’s been staring at his eggs for the last five minutes. Bobby offers his consolation, but Dean does not feel consoled. He has to know where he is, if he’s okay. He knows Cas can take care of himself, but he just...has to know. If he’s okay. If he’s with someone. If there’s any chance between them at all.

Moving Bobby into the living room with his latest audiobook, Dean ducks into his bedroom and texts Cas, asking if he’s okay and if they can talk. After a few minutes with no response, he calls Cas’ phone, which goes straight to voicemail. His phone is off.

Great.

He hopes against hope that maybe Cas is somewhere other than a rando’s bed. He tries calling Charlie’s phone, which also goes to voicemail. Jo’s doesn’t go right to voicemail, but she doesn’t pick up, either. He texts Meg, Gabe, Zar, even Kevin from the coffee shop—none of them have seen him. He calls Giulia at the restaurant, figuring they’re prepping for the day, and she says he’s not there, either. He calls Ellen, who also has no clue where he is. He calls Charlie again—still right to voicemail—and texts Jo. A few minutes later, Jo texts back:

To Dean 9:02am: What

To Jo 9:02am: Have you seen Cas? We had a fight last night and he left and I’m worried. I don’t know where he ended up.

To Dean 9:03am: You wanna know where he ended up? Or who he ended up with? You want to know if someone fucked him?

To Jo 9:03am: Jo, please, come on
Dean opens the photo attachment. It’s Cas, in a bed he doesn’t recognize, naked as far as he can tell (though he can only see part of his back). He has a man to his left. Dean’s heart sinks, a lump sitting heavily in his throat.

Another message from her comes in. Another photo, this with a different man. And a third photo, this with two men. Dean squeezes his bleary eyes to the pain in his chest before looking at the photos again. Cas is posed exactly the same, even though the men are different.

To Jo 9:18am: He was here last night when I came home from work. The only one who fucked him over is you.

To Jo 9:19am: I’m coming over

To Jo 9:19am: I wouldn’t advise that

To Jo 9:19am: Why not?

To Dean 9:20am: Because Charlie was PISSED. It’s pretty bad when I’M the calm one.

Dean calls, hoping to convince Jo to let him come over. The women can work it out between themselves later.

“Dean, I’m telling you, you don’t wanna be here right now,” Jo says without even a hello.

“Jo, listen, I just need a few minutes with him. This got out of hand, it wasn’t even planned, I—” His explanation is interrupted by another, very angry voice.

“Dean Winchester, you’d better have a damn good explanation for breaking his heart! I swear to God I will make your life a living hell if—”

“Babe, stop—”

“I will not stop! I’m pissed! And he needs to understand what he did!”

“Give me—you’re gonna wake him!”

“Well give it and I’ll go yell at him in another room!”

Apparently the women are arguing over the phone. Dean sighs and waits through the sounds of rustling and shuffling. Charlie wins, because it’s her voice he hears next, though it sounds like he’s on speaker now.

“You don’t even know how bad you hurt him, do you? He was fucked over in his last relationship,
Dean, and you had to screw with him!”

“I’m sorry! It wasn’t intentional—”

“Flirting with someone to make someone else jealous isn’t intentional?”

“No, I mean I just need to explain—”

“You need to explain, all right. You need to explain why you were such a dick!”

“Fuck, Charlie, I was trying to get him to give us a chance. He won’t even give us a chance!”

“So this was your brilliant idea?”

“I had nothing left! I’m sorry! It was Aaron and Benny’s idea and they started it before I even knew what was going on, and then when they told me I figured, what the hell? I had nothing, Charlie, nothing! I didn’t want to hurt him, I swear! I just wanted him to see how bad it would be if we moved on without each other, you know? I was desperate! Haven’t you ever been so desperate that you’ve done something incredibly stupid?”

“Yes,” a deep, rumbling voice sighs. Dean’s breath stills. “Give me the phone, Charlie.”

“You don’t need to talk to him right now just because he called,” Charlie argues, her voice sounding further away.

“Yes, dear, I know. Give me the phone.”

“I’m not done giving him a piece of my mind!”

“You fiery redheads,” he says. It’s fond and teasing. Dean aches, scared that he’ll never hear Cas speak to him that way again. “Come on. Pass it over.” A pause, then, “Charlie.”

He hears someone huff, then rustling and grumbling, and then, “Mr. Winchester.”

The formality is a stab to the heart. “Cas, please don’t. Can I see you? Please?”

“I’m afraid I already have plans. I will see you this evening when I come to assist Bobby.”

“I hurt you and I’m so sorry.”

For a moment there’s only the sound of Cas’ breath blowing a thin static over the line. “I’m fine, Mr. Winchester. I will see you tonight.” He hangs up, and Dean screams and flings the phone across the room. He holds his head in his hands for a moment, thinking. Pieces of seemingly random thoughts and interactions slot together, and he makes up his mind.

“Headin’ out?” Bobby asks his nephew as Dean flies down the stairs and around the living room. He wiggles his feet into shoes and wanders in circles around the living room, looking frantically for his keys.

“Yeah.” He looks Bobby over, making sure he has what he needs. “I gotta go talk to Cas.”

“He even wanna see ya?”

“Nope. But I can’t give up, Bobby. He’s scared and I need him to know he doesn’t have to be scared with me. I don’t want him to choose to be alone just ‘cause of whatever shit happened before.”
“Good luck, son. Go get ‘im.” Pride shines in Bobby’s eyes, and it makes Dean more determined than ever. He reaches out and hugs his uncle, then grabs his keys that were right in front of him and heads out.

He knows just what kind of reception he’s going to get when the door is opened, and he’s not wrong. “What?” Charlie asks, arms folded as she glares at him. It’s the same look that Sam used to give him when he was both pissed off and disappointed in him, a look that says I love you but I am way too pissed to like you right now.

“I went about it all wrong, but Charlie, I want Cas so badly and he keeps pushing me away because he’s scared, but I know he wants me too and he just won’t let himself and I can’t, Charlie, I can’t give up on him. I won’t give up on him. Please.”

She stares at him for a long time before deflating. “He’s in his old room,” she says. “His old room that’s still available to him if you break his heart again, got it?”

“Yes, got it. Thank you. Thank you for helping him last night and being a great wife to him.”

Charlie smiles reluctantly. “He’s so damn stubborn. Good thing you’re stubborn, too. Just don’t take your romance advice from your work buddies from now on.”

“Trust me, I won’t. Thanks.”

He toes off his shoes and walks softly to the only closed door, then knocks. When Cas gives permission to enter, he does so and closes the door behind him, then approaches the bed. Cas, shirtless and reading something on his iPad, looks up.

“De—Mr. Winchester,” Cas stutters, clearly surprised. “What—”

Dean doesn’t give him a chance to say anything else before he tosses his iPad aside, straddles his hips, and folds him into a hug. He’s not hugging back like he usually would, but that’s okay. This hug isn’t for Dean; it’s for Cas. “I’m so, so sorry I hurt you,” he whispers.

“I’m fi—”

“I’m so, so sorry I hurt you.” He hugs him closer, but gently, cradling his head and caressing his hair.

“I’ll be fin—”

“Aunt Karen taught me that when you do something wrong, you make it right. I hurt you. The opposite of hurting is healing, right? And touch is healing. You told me.” He hugs him a little tighter. “I’m trying to heal us, Cas. I can’t take back what I did, but I can take responsibility for it and I can make amends. I can show you that I know I wronged you. I can show you that it matters to me that I hurt you and that I want to fix it. You aren’t fine.”

After a moment, Dean feels Cas’ arms loop around his waist and his head rest heavier on his chest. “You aren’t fine, either. I hurt you, too.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know. And I know what I did was stupid and childish, but I honestly didn’t know what else to do. I know this is hard for you even if I don’t really understand why, and maybe I should’ve done more to understand, but when I tried I couldn’t get any answers from you.”
“I know.”

“I had to do something.”

“I know.”

“Guess you got so good at pushing people away that no one pushed you back, either, huh?” Dean says, remembering his own comment from Thanksgiving. He feels Cas shift, just enough to feel the tickle of his hair on his chin. “But I’m pushy, too. Learned that from a really great friend who’s never let me get away with devaluing myself.” A tiny shift of Cas’ face against his shirt tells him that Cas is probably smiling. “Even taught me fancy professor words like ‘devaluing,’” Dean jokes, then pulls back to look at Cas, who is indeed smiling.

In that moment, he realizes just how close to Cas he is, how intimate it is to be in Cas’ old bed, Cas naked in more ways than one. Dean takes his face in his hands. “Please don’t devalue yourself. You deserve good things.” He presses a gentle kiss on his forehead. Cas’ warm breath ripples over his collarbone.

“You deserve to know why,” Cas whispers on a shaky exhale. “I’ll tell you.”

“Okay.” He moves off Cas and to his side, wrapping one hand around the nape of his neck and playing with the short hairs there while holding his other. Cas shifts to see him better. Dean swallows and waits.

“The ethics of it all were never the whole issue. It’s true that there’s nothing that prohibits me from getting involved with you.” Dean exhales quietly. He knew, but Cas clearly confirming it helps. “But it’s also true that it’s not necessarily a great idea. I know from experience.”

“Jonathan or Benjamin?”

“Jonathan. But you need to know about Benji first.” A shiver of jealousy courses through Dean. Benji. An affectionate nickname. He shifts the pillow under his flank so he can lean into it more comfortably, pulling Cas a little closer in the process. Cas follows. “Benji was a beautiful person—handsome, thoughtful, well-liked by everyone. He had a stable job, was in good health, and ate his vegetables. He did great in school, never in trouble a day in his life. He came from a perfect family of perfectly nice people with respectable jobs and middle-class views, not a tragedy among them. Benji was uncomplicated, everything I dreamed of and wanted in my life. So of course I pushed him away.” Cas gazes to his left, staring at nothing that Dean can see. Probably a memory of the perfect ex-lover that he let get away. Someone Dean, with his rough past and complicated present, could never hope to be.

“He told me he loved me. He told me he wanted a life with me—kids, a house, the whole nine yards. I told him I wasn’t sure I could say it back.” He pauses for breath, and Dean waits. “When your past is as screwed up as mine, when your parents are the poster children for bad decisions and bad relationships, it’s hard to understand what love is. The people who were supposed to teach me about love were really bad at it, and yet they told me, once in a while, that they loved me. But what they did, what I went through, it didn’t feel like what I thought love was supposed to feel like, so I couldn’t trust those words. Yet what he offered me felt wrong, too. My parents’ relationship was horrible, obviously, but what we had didn’t feel quite right, either, even when everyone told us how perfect we were together. Maybe it was too good, I don’t know. Anyway, I figured the problem was me, that I was broken, so I told him to let me go.”

Dean frowns. “And he did? He just…let you go?”
“I told him to.”

“So? He said he loved you. I don’t understand how he could just let you go if he loved you.”

Cas shrugs and Dean’s frown deepens, but Cas continues talking. “A year or so later I met Jonathan. I was his father’s nurse in hospice. I got to know him when he’d come visit his dad. Jonathan was funny and charming. I was impressed with his attention to his father, as tough as the old guy could be on him. He worked hard, holding down three jobs at a time. I felt horrible for him, sacrificing so much. We grew pretty close during his visits. When his father improved enough to actually leave hospice for a while, Jonathan begged me to help him with his home care. I hesitated—just a gut reaction, I wasn’t even sure where it came from—but then he...kissed me, and told me he needed me, and I...I wanted to support him, to help him, because I liked him and he was doing this all alone, so I agreed. As far as the relationship between us, I tried to stop it and gave him the same arguments I gave you, but he was persistent, and I was attracted to him and lonely after Benji and”—Cas shrugs and averts his eyes—“I caved.”

“Hey,” Dean says, lifting Cas’ chin. “You don’t have to be ashamed. You have feelings, too.”

“My feelings didn’t belong there, in that relationship.”

“It happens.” Cas raises a brow at Dean’s crooked grin.

“Nonetheless. Anyway, I felt bad about it the entire time. But every time I tried to pull back, he told me how much he needed me. It should’ve been a sign, looking back, but I wasn’t looking for that. I took him at his word. And I guess for me, someone needing me meant that they cared about me.

“I gave him and his father everything I had, everything I could. I was still working at the hospice, so between that and caring for his father I cared for myself very little. I kept reminding myself that it was worth it, though, because Jonathan needed me and he appreciated me. When his dad got sicker and had to go back to hospice, though, things fell apart.”

Dean squeezes his hand to comfort him. One corner of his mouth twists up as he continues, “I tried to comfort him, tried to be there for him, but he kept rejecting me. Then one day Jonathan told me it was my fault, said I didn’t do everything I could and that I was ‘too invested’ in our relationship to pay attention to what his father needed. It wasn’t true. He was very ill and nature does what it does, but some people have a hard time seeing that when they’re grieving and I figured he was one of them. I backed off and tried to be there for him from afar, and I worked even harder to give his father comfort and good care at the hospice until he requested that I be taken off the case. And then I found out Jonathan had been playing me.”

“What happened?” Dean asks,anguished by this painful glimpse into Cas’ life.

“I found out the truth about his second and third jobs. I happened to be there when his third job came in. She asked me for help finding his room and told me she was his girlfriend, and that she had just wanted to meet his father before he died. I took her name and told her that I needed to check in with the family before she could visit. I’d been told that Jonathan was in his father’s room, so I decided I would confront him with the information. I wasn’t going to make it big and dramatic—we were basically over anyway and, with this new info, we were definitely over—but I at least wanted him to know that I knew. So I turned the corner to his room and found Jonathan there at his father’s bedside—with his wife and two kids. His ‘second job.’”

Dean gasps. “Holy shit. How did you know they were his family?”

“I just did. It was one of those moments when everything becomes crystal clear. Well, that and the
“Whoa. What the hell did you do?”

“Jonathan saw me and rushed out the door. He pulled me aside in the hall and I just said, ‘Why?’ And he said that his father liked me and tolerated me enough to take care of him, which took the weight off Jonathan’s shoulders, so he figured if we got involved he’d keep me around.” Cas shakes his head. “He didn’t want me for me. He just needed a nurse for his father. He...exploited me, and I let it happen. Stupid. Then he told me that we never had a relationship, and if I breathed a word otherwise to his wife that he would have my nursing license.”

“That fucking bastard,” Dean grinds out. He’s never been so pissed.

“So I said, ‘What relationship?’ and walked away. Then I went back to his girlfriend, told her the room number and that it was a little crowded because his wife and kids were also visiting, and went back to the nurses’ station.”

“Duu-u-ude,” Dean stutters in awe, a smile creeping on his face.

“I’ve always been ashamed at how much I enjoyed the blowup that happened.” He grins, devilish and gorgeous, and they giggle until they roar with laughter.

“Shit, Cas,” Dean says when they’ve caught their breath. “That bastard deserved it.”

“Yes, he did. But I shouldn’t have gotten involved in the first place. Between him and Benji, it’s pretty clear I’m not relationship material. So. Now you know.”

Dean sees flaws in his judgment. Growing serious, Dean says, “I think it was the guys, not you.”

Cas snorts. “Benji was the perfect man and he said he loved me, and I still pushed him away. That was crazy enough, but then I let myself get involved with Jonathan, thinking maybe he’d be different because he understood the complexities of life in a way Benji never seemed to. And honestly, he needed me, and I probably thought that needing someone equaled loving someone, which it didn’t in that case. Maybe it was the only kind of love I could understand or tolerate at the time. But Jonathan was the son of a patient, and I never should have crossed the line, because it potentially jeopardized his father’s care. Not to mention how messy things became when his father got sick again. It was hard to be blamed for that. Really hard.”

Debating with himself, Dean finally says, “You know, Cas, everything with Jonathan was fucked up, but not because he was the son of a patient. It’s because he didn’t go into it with good intentions, and you went into it with great intentions but not the right ones for a relationship. And Benjamin? He wasn’t perfect, or at least not perfect for you. He didn’t see how scared you were. He didn’t get that you’d need extra time, that you were gonna fight him on this whole love thing because of everything that’s happened in your life with your folks. He didn’t push back. He didn’t insist that you demand more for yourself. He just left.”

Cas licks his lips and shrugs a shoulder. “I suppose.”

Dean shifts, sitting up straighter and drawing him forward until their foreheads touch. “I’m not perfect, Cas, God knows. But you and me, I think we’re perfect for each other. I know me being Bobby’s sort-of nephew weirds you out, but I’m not Jonathan. And I’m not Benjamin, either. I get your life, Cas. I get it, and I know admitting to yourself every day that you’re worthy of more than just whatever scraps people throw at you is hard. I live that. But you haven’t given up on me, and I’m not letting you give up without a fight, either. I’m fighting for you for me, and I’m fighting for
you for you. I want you to fight for yourself.”

Cas gazes at him, blue eyes clear and deep. His eyes drop to his mouth, which is so close he can feel Cas’ stubble catching against his own above his upper lip. “It’s your move, Cas,” Dean says. Cas’ eyes flick back to his, then down to his mouth again, his eyes closing. Dean holds his breath.

Chapter End Notes

Warning for the following:
Mentions of infidelity and exploitation of a partner in a relationship

Next chapter: The truth shall set you free. <3
He’s right there.

His stubbled face. His hot breath. His plump lips. Right there. All he has to do is surrender.

He doesn’t.

“Dean,” Cas whispers, not opening his eyes.

“Hmm?”

“I don’t know if I can. Not...today.”

“Okay.” He doesn’t move. He doesn’t ask. He just stays. He just stays.

“Dean.”

“Hmm?”

Castiel swallows hard. “Would you just...be with me today?”

He knows it’s an odd request, especially with no context to it. He feels Dean’s face shift back minutely and opens his eyes. Dean’s face is full of regret, and embarrassment at his neediness shivers through him until Dean says, “I can, but it’ll have to be back at our place ‘cause of Bobby. I’m sorry.”

Oh. He feels bad about having other responsibilities. Relief fills the space his embarrassment fled.

“He feels bad about having other responsibilities. Relief fills the space his embarrassment fled. “Of course, I know.”

“I’d love nothing more than to hang out with you just like this all day...”

“I know, I know. Don’t worry about it.”

“But I do. I want you to understand that it’s not—”

“Dean,” he smiles. “I know.” He presses his face against Dean’s, cheek to cheek in a sort of face-hug, then pulls back just enough to see those mossy green eyes. “Let’s go have Sunday Funday at home, huh? We’ll get the girls to come over, order pizza. What do you think?”
“I think that would be great if I wasn’t still terrified of Charlie killing me.”

Cas chuckles. “She’s pretty feisty when she wants to be.”

“No shit.”

“She still loves you, though, don’t worry. She reamed me out, too, by the way, for being stubborn and not telling you about Jonathan.” He pauses, then adds, “She doesn’t know about Benji.”

“She doesn’t?”

“No. I met her shortly after we split, and I didn’t tell anyone I met afterwards about him until you.” He twists his mouth and shrugs as if that detail isn’t the major one that it is. “So, Sunday Funday?” He smiles at Dean, still so close to him, as if too much distance would break their tentative intimacy. Dean nods and smiles, tiny and warm. Cas swallows, not able to wipe the smile from his own face if he tried. Backing up, he shouts, “Charlie? Jo? Sunday Funday?”

Two heads poke through the doorway. “Everything okay?” Charlie asks with a hopeful grimace.

“Yes, everything’s okay,” he reassures her.

“Yay!” she squeals in typical Charlie fashion before bowling both men over in a hug that resembles a clothesline maneuver he’s seen on wrestling programs. “I’m so glad you made up! I hate being mad at my Deanie Beanie!” She plants a huge kiss on Dean’s cheek that makes him blush. His relief that he and Charlie are okay is evident in his huge smile. Castiel adores that smile. Jo slams onto the bed behind him, her knee landing in his rump. He’s grateful his back was to her—the consequences of facing the other way would have been very painful. She climbs over him and slots herself between him and Charlie. The women, still in their pajamas, snuggle into the men flanking them.

“Well, we’re finally having that foursome,” Cas remarks, then peeks at Dean, whose face reddens as the women shriek.

“And the two gay dudes are furthest from each other. Great,” Dean groans with a teasing lilt to his voice as he tries to recover from his embarrassment.

“Well, we like to team up on Cas, you know,” Jo says, making poor Dean flush even deeper.

“You guys suck,” Dean mutters.

Cas can’t resist. “That’s my favorite part,” he grins. Dean grabs the pillow underneath his head and flings it at him, which in this house is an act of war. Soon pillows are flying, end tables are cleared of their contents, and everyone is breathless.

“Alright, everyone out so I can get dressed,” Cas orders. The three scramble off his bed and start heading to the door when Jo says, “Wait, it’s Sunday Funday, right? Don’t you need to wear your best suit?” Before Cas can process her words, Jo sprints toward him and rips the bedsheets off his body, exposing him for the world (okay, Dean, since it’s nothing new to the other two) to see.

“Dick!” he shouts, pulling his sheets up even though he’s sure Dean already got an eyeful.

“Yes, we know that’s your dick, good job,” Jo teases.

“What’ve we said about that, Cas?” Charlie adds. “That’s not an insult coming from you.”

“What’s coming from him?” Jo volleys, highlighting her obvious sexual innuendo with a jerking-off
“Hags,” Cas scowls. “Go away.”

They leave, Dean’s eyes lingering on him with a little smile before he closes the door. Cas falls back onto the bed. This day was going to suck regardless, so he’s glad at least things are better with Dean. Maybe even hopeful, if he allows himself what he wants.

He gets dressed in the shorts and t-shirt he packed in his overnight bag, then shuffles into the bathroom to brush his teeth and flick his fingers through his hair. It’s unruly this morning, as it usually is with no styling product in it. He shrugs at his reflection. He doesn’t look his best, but he doesn’t feel his best, either. Hell, the fact that he managed to smile today is already a win. He gathers his things and meets everyone outside, then they make their way to Dean and Bobby’s…and Cas too, he supposes.

The ladies go running inside when they get there, disturbing Bobby’s quiet. Dean holds Cas back by his t-shirt, his knuckles just grazing the skin underneath. “So, are we okay? Really. No bullshit.”

Dean’s hand is cool, his face uncertain. Cas takes his other hand, hanging limply by his side. “We’re okay. I forgive you for the completely stupid and pathetic attempt to make me jealous.” He finishes his statement with a small uptick of his lips.

“Which totally worked,” Dean says, smirking mischievously until his face falls. “Except that it also made things worse.”

“I don’t know,” Cas responds, bouncing his head side to side the way Bobby does. “We’re okay. I forgive you for the completely stupid and pathetic attempt to make me jealous.” He finishes his statement with a small uptick of his lips.

“Which totally worked,” Dean says, smirking mischievously until his face falls. “Except that it also made things worse.”

“I don’t know,” Cas responds, bouncing his head side to side the way Bobby does. “Maybe it didn’t. Maybe we needed a colonic.”

“Gross, dude. ‘Sides, you’re the one who needed one. I was fine.”

“So you’re saying you spew shit without a problem? That I believe.”

“Asshole,” Dean laughs.

Cas laughs, too, the weight of the day already easier to bear because of Dean’s presence. Sobering, he says, “I want to talk about this more, but just…I can’t today. But I am sorry that I’ve hurt you. It wasn’t intentional. I figured you’d lose interest eventually and I could just…” He stops.

“Just keep being alone and denying yourself?”

With a twist of his lips, Cas admits, “Basically.”

Dean shifts on his feet. His hand squeezes Cas’ hip, where he still has a hold of his shirt. “Listen, I wasn’t trying to be a creeper or crazy stalker or something, okay? I only pursued this because I’m happy with you and…I just don’t take that for granted anymore, ‘specially since I didn’t think I’d ever have it. And I’m not happy ‘cause you’re relieving my stress or something. I just…really like you. If Bobby wasn’t around and it was just us, I’d still like you and I’d still want to be with you. You told me there was something between us, so I just thought that you felt the same but you were afraid. And I get it, I do, ‘cause caring so much about someone means they can really hurt you if they leave, you know? But I didn’t want fear to stop you, so I pushed. Tell me if I’m wrong, though, okay? Tell me if you just don’t care for me that way anymore and I’ll stop.”

He could easily tell him he was wrong, couldn’t he? But not really, because for all Castiel has ever tried to keep his emotions in check, he’s never been good at it when he’s invested in the outcome. And Dean deserves more than a lie (and more than him, sure, but he’s clearly not going for that, the
stubborn man). “I care about you, Dean,” he says, palming Dean’s cheek with his free hand. Dean sighs, relieved, and Cas does, too. His eyes are so green in the sun, Cas notices. He tips his face into Dean’s and nuzzles his nose lightly. So close. So easy. Cas sways a little, unintentionally, and Dean braces him with the hand on his hip as he sways with him. So close...

“Come on, you tw—oooh, sorry!” Charlie calls from the door. “Sorry, carry on with smooches! We’ll fend for ourselves!” The door slams and the two men laugh.

“Smooches. Is that what was gonna happen?” Dean asks, hopefulness lifting his brows.

“Not today,” Cas answers with a sigh and a tiny but reassuring smile. Any day but today.

The ladies have ordered pizza and are gossiping with Bobby about last night when they come into the house. “You’re not even subtle about your gossiping, you harpies,” Cas grumbles.

“You two weren’t very subtle last night,” Bobby notes. He wondered on the way over if things would be difficult between him and Bobby since Dean is his nephew, but the man has a gentle look in his eyes. He smiles and resolves to talk to him about it later. About a couple of things, perhaps.

Pizza arrives and they eat, talking amiably. In the afternoon, they play Halo and Cas crushes his opponents. Dean vows he will never play the game with Cas again, and Cas pats his shoulder in consolation while Charlie says, “Told you. Ruthless.” In the evening, the four of them eat roasted chicken and play trivia games that Bobby wins easily. The day feels remarkably, unusually easy. Normal. Or as normal as Cas’ life gets. It’s disconcerting yet welcome.

When the women get ready to leave, Charlie pulls him in for an extra-long hug. “You’re okay?” she asks in his ear. He knows she’s talking about the situation with Dean and not about today, because she doesn’t know what today is.

“Yes, I’m good. Thank you for being there for me. All the time, not just last night,” he says. He feels emotion swelling in his chest and hugs her tighter.

“You’re welcome,” she murmurs. He hears the questioning frown in her voice but doesn’t answer her unasked query.

“Night hubs,” Jo says, taking her turn. He lifts her and squeezes her tightly, telling her something similar to what he told Charlie. Always bashful about a sincere, heartfelt compliment, she scowls and shakes her head dismissively even as her cheeks bloom a rosy red.

The men watch TV for a while and the empty sadness he expected all day finally comes. It’s colder now, less intense than it used to be, but still present. The baseball game becomes a faint buzz in the back of his mind as memories creep in...colors and smells and the sound of silence, sense memories that will probably never be forgotten entirely, no matter the passage of time. He stays there for a while, detached. Therapy helped with that detachment; it’s a healthy detachment now. He has gotten healthier over the years. He has to remember that. The intimacy stuff, though...it’s tough. He longs for it, thirsts for it like a neglected plant for water, but doesn’t trust it. How can he? But maybe, with Dean...

Bobby announces his decision to go to bed and listen to an audiobook. Dean gets up to help, but it’s Cas’ night and he can use the distraction. He tells Dean as much and rolls Bobby to his room.

“You two alright?” Bobby asks.

“I think so. I’m sorry about the scene I made last night.” He hooks the Hoyer into the sling and places Bobby on the bed to undress him and prepare him for the commode.
“It’s alright. Wouldn’t’ve had to make it if my boy hadn’t been so dumb. Or if you got your head out of your ass about this whole thing between ya.” He arches a brow at Cas.

“Yes, thank you,” Cas snarks, though his smirk softens his sarcasm. He helps Bobby with the commode, then with his incontinence brief and pajamas, all while psyching himself up to say what he needs to say next. “I, uh, I think Dean and I might try it out. A relationship. Maybe. What do you think?” His words are rushed, his tone anxious. Even if he thinks he knows how Bobby feels about it, he wants to be sure. Bobby’s opinion of this matters to him—and not just as his patient. He fiddles with the boots Bobby wears at night for the neuropathy as he waits for his response.

“Cas,” Bobby says once, then again when Cas doesn’t make eye contact. He looks into the face of the man who calls him family. “Cas, I’m damn happy for you two.”

“No guarantees,” Cas warns, but smiles anyway. “We haven’t really talked it through.”

“Well, get goin’. Every minute you don’t talk is a minute wasted, son. You only got so many of those minutes, so you gotta make ‘em count.” Bobby nods, seemingly pleased with his own advice. Cas smiles ruefully, all too aware of what he means.

“Thank you. Whatever happens, I won’t let it interfere with your care.”

“Boy, the only thing I’m worried about it interferin’ with is my sleep, so make sure you two keep it down.”

Despite the sensitive topic and the sensitivity of the day in general, Cas laughs. “Wowww, Bobby. And here I am trying to be delicate about the whole thing.”

“Since when are you delicate about anything?” Bobby grins.

Cas shakes his head and turns on the audiobook, then heads for the door. “Just for that, I’m making your nephew yell extra loud when we’re knocking boots!” he calls as he exits. He hears Bobby guffaw all the way down the hall. He turns into the living room to see Dean, wide-eyed and twisted around on the couch, watching him enter. “What? I didn’t mean tonight,” he says teasingly.

“Get a man’s hopes up, why don’t you?” Dean laughs.

They settle back on the couch and Dean starts a nature documentary. It’s tranquil and soothing and not typically Dean’s thing, so Cas knows it’s for him. They lean against each other and listen to the narrator talk about the meanings of different whale calls. He feels himself sinking into exhaustion and sadness again, or at least that feeling that he’s come to associate with sadness that isn’t really sadness, but a lingering, wistful regret and wish for something that never was and never would be.

“Hey,” Dean whispers. “Can I give you a hug? You look like you’ve needed one all day.”

They don’t ask about hugging, usually. They just do it. But for Dean to recognize that he might need to ask…it shows just how attuned Dean is to him. “Yes.”

Dean embraces him, warm and tight, then scoots until he’s lying on the couch and coaxes Cas down to join him. Cas does, facing the TV, and Dean wraps an arm around his waist and another around his collarbone. It reminds him of how he and Benji would lie sometimes, with one major difference—he never felt quite as secure in his insecurity as he does with Dean, never quite willing to be seen as much as he’s let Dean see him. Not that Dean has the full picture—does anyone, really, about anyone?—but Dean understands in a way that only experience can teach. He relaxes, his thoughts floating, until he realizes another major difference, likely born of the first: he never wanted to tell Benji about what happened on this day many years ago, but he wants to tell Dean. He’s never
wanted to tell anyone, and he never has. But now... He turns in Dean’s arms, facing him before he can second-guess this sudden compulsion like he second-guesses everything else in his life. Dean adjusts and gives him his full attention. He brushes his hand through his hair, waiting, undemanding.

“My mom killed herself today,” he admits, staring at the worn collar of Dean’s shirt. He feels the hand in his hair pause for half a second, then continue stroking. Cas swallows the lump in his throat and stays quiet for a while, waiting to implode or to fall apart or something. Nothing happens, except that the tightness in his chest eases a bit. Dean kisses his forehead, and then it eases a lot.

“I was, um, eighteen. I came home from work and found her. She’d stabbed herself and hit an artery. There was so much blood. So much. It smelled like death and SoCo and burnt toast in the kitchen. I didn’t even go to her to see if she was alive. I knew. And the truth is, I wasn’t even that surprised. She didn’t leave a note, so I have no idea what she was thinking or whether it was even intentional or the result of a hallucination or one of her delusions. Doesn’t really matter. The result is the same. She left me.” Hot, plump tears drip down his face against his will, tears he’s only allowed to fall for her when he’s alone. “Logically, I know that she was ill. But emotionally… I sacrificed my life for her, clung to her side to keep her alive and safe, and she died anyway, by her own hand. She claimed she loved me, yet she killed herself instead of staying with me.”

Dean pulls him into his chest. “I’m not leaving you, Cas.”

“But how do I know?”

“You don’t, and that’s what sucks. All I can give you is my word and everything I’ve done so far. But I’m not leaving. I know what it’s like to be left. It’s awful. I don’t want to leave you. I want to be with you.”

“Why?”

Tenderly, Dean wipes the tears from Cas’ face. “When we hang out, I’m always wondering how we can spend more time together. When we’re sitting together, I wonder how much closer we can get. When we’re apart, I can’t wait to see you again. I like how I feel around you. I like how you don’t back down from me, and how you stand up for people and get them to open up, and how you turn into a pile of mush when shown affection.”

“I do not.”

“You do and I love it.”

Cas frowns and Dean kisses his nose. Feeling the heat rise in his cheeks, he realizes Dean is right. “Shut up,” he says to Dean’s knowing smile.

“Told you.”

“I said shut up,” Cas demands, poking him in the belly.

“Oh, now you’ve done it,” Dean growls. And just like in the morning with the pillows, war is called — of the tickling variety. He digs his fingers into Cas’ ribs, making Cas buck and squirm until he pushes himself to the floor to catch his breath. “Surrender,” Dean demands, hands looming above him.

“Make me,” Cas challenges right back.

Dean drops to the floor and, this time, Cas is ready for him. He uses Dean’s momentum to flip him onto his back, then starts his own tickle torture until Dean yells, “Okay, okay! Stop!”
Cas does, grinning down at Dean. “Made you yell,” he crows.

“Yeah, yeah.” Dean pulls him down to his chest and they lie quietly for a while, catching their breath and enjoying the closeness. “You look good naked, by the way,” Dean teases.

“I know.”

“Cocky bastard.”

“It’s pretty amazing how cocky I am considering the shit life I’ve had.”

“Cockiness out of necessity. Dr. Phil would say you’re using a defense mechanism.”

“Doctor Phil can kiss my ass.”

Dean chuckles. “I do it, too. Or I did. Then I stopped giving a shit and I stopped using it.”

“Really? Because you still seem pretty cocky to me.”

“Yeah, well, that’s earned cockiness now, baby.”

“Is that so? We’ll see.” Cas grins at Dean to show him he’s laughing with him and not at him.

“Think you earned your cockiness, too,” Dean answers more seriously, tracing a finger down Cas’ jaw.

“Yeah? How so?”

“You’ve lived through a lot and yet you keep kicking ass, you know? Life tried to beat you down and you just kept telling it to fuck off. You supported your family, finished your education, made it through the Army even though I bet you were a rebellious little shit”—Dean chucks him under the chin and Cas’ ears warm—“and you’ve had a successful career. You’ve made lots of friends who love you and you broke it off with that asshole in the most awesome way.” Cas snickers at Dean’s delighted grin. “You even got a grumpy-ass curmudgeon to like you.”

“Yes, and his uncle likes me, too.”

Dean glares at him as Cas howls in laughter, pleased with himself. “My point, you pain in my ass,” Dean says with a pinch to Cas’ arm, “is that you’ve earned yourself the right to feel good about yourself. No one should have to earn that, but you did. And I did. So we should go with it and feel good about ourselves, give ourselves a chance to have decent lives even if they started shitty.”

Softly, Cas says, “You’re right.” He strokes Dean’s face with his knuckles. “What time is it?”

Dean cranes his head up to look at the clock in the kitchen. Squinting, he says, “Uh, just after midnight, looks like?”

“It’s over,” Cas says. “It’s a new day. Thank you, Dean.” Dean doesn’t seem to need an explanation. He sits them both up and encircles Cas with his arms and legs. Cas leans against his shoulder, considering his life up until now. For all his trauma and all his mistakes, he still feels like he has a life worth living, even if others didn’t stick around to live it with him. Dean has helped make it so. And Dean has stuck around.

“You know when you asked Charlie if she was ever so desperate that she did something stupid, and I said yes?” Dean hums, so Cas continues, “Pushing you away was my something stupid.”
Dean sits back until their eyes meet and their noses touch. “Yeah?”

“I was desperate not to feel everything I was feeling. These feelings in the past...anytime I felt them like this, anytime I wanted someone to feel them in return...” He huffs a tiny breath against Dean’s lips. “When I started feeling them again, and more, I just wanted to follow the rules I set for myself and avoid the trouble of...of feeling this way.”

Dean thumbs at Cas’ jaw. “But you’re not great at following the rules?” he asks hopefully.

Cas takes a shuddering breath. If you step off this precipice now, there’s no going back. “I like a little trouble,” he smiles, then closes the tiny gap between them with a slow, tentative kiss. When he backs away, lips sticking as if they don’t want to let go, Dean’s soft, wondrous smile morphs into a smirk. “What?” Cas asks.

“Made you surrender.”

Cas’ mouth twists into a reluctant smile. “So you did.” He leans in, as if he’s going to kiss him again, and Dean eagerly leans forward. When he’s a hair’s breadth away, he murmurs “Cocky” against his lips and stands. “Hope you enjoyed that kiss, Dean. Good night.”

“What? Wait, come back!” Dean whisper-shouts as Cas starts climbing the stairs, heading for his room. “You were just about to kiss me again!”

“That’s before you got cocky.” He can hardly contain the smile on his face, but he stuffs it behind a serious mask.

“I was just teasing! Come on!”

“No, no, I think you need to sit in your room and think about what you did.” He makes it to his bedroom and turns to face Dean.

“Come on, please? I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“Please let me kiss you goodnight, at least? I just got you. I don’t want to let go.” Dean pauses, licking and biting his lip. “I mean, that’s what you meant, right? We’re gonna make a go of this?”

Castiel softens. He knows the vulnerability Dean is feeling, the chance he’s taking, has been taking ever since he offered Cas his heart. “Yes, Dean.” He caresses a hand across Dean’s stubble.

“Good. Okay, good. So? One more goodnight kiss? Please?”

Cas draws him in by his shirt and they moan as their lips collide, no tentativeness this time. Several breathy kisses later, he says, “Thank you for being patient with me.”

“You were worth waiting for. Thanks for giving me a chance.”

Cas nuzzles his nose and smiles softly. If anyone was worth waiting for, it was Dean. “I’d take all my chances on you.” He leans back to take in the stuttering rise of Dean’s chest, the fluttering pulse on his neck, the light in his eyes even in the dimness of the hall. “Just remember one thing for me, okay?”

A glowing smile unfurls on Dean’s lips. “What?”

Standing in his open doorway, he reels Dean in for one final kiss. Then, forehead to forehead, breath
puffing against wet lips, Cas whispers, “I made you beg.”

He can still hear Dean’s laughter after he closes his bedroom door.

Chapter End Notes

Warning for the following:
- Discussion and description of suicide (including mentions of blood)

Well, that was a roller coaster, wasn’t it? But here we are! <3

Next chapter: An honest-to-goodness date!
Chapter 17

Date night ;)

Some heavy talk toward the end. Check the warning in the end notes if you feel you need to. (I think this is the last of Cas’ past we find out about.) <3

A couple of weeks after their talk, everything is much the same and yet irrevocably changed. He still goes to work. He still cares for Bobby. He still worries about the bills. He’s still tired and sometimes he’s irritable and sometimes he and Cas argue about nothing. But at the same time, everything has a lightness to it that definitely didn’t exist before. He’s not alone. He has Cas...Cas to come home to after work, to help him care for Bobby, to share his worries with, to support him when he’s tired, to throw his own shit right back at him when he’s irritable, and to laugh with when they realize their arguments are ridiculous. And of course, he has Cas to curl up with on the couch and Cas to kiss goodnight...and good morning...and hello...and goodbye...and hey there, handsome...so, yes, Dean feels pretty damn light on his feet these days.

That feeling intensifies when Cas asks him on an honest-to-goodness date.

“Oh, God, I need new clothes and...and a haircut, and...shit, where are we gonna go? Need to find someplace nice...”

“He asked you, dumbass. I reckon he’s pickin’ the place,” Bobby reasons.

“Still. What do I wear?”

“You gay guys and your clothes,” Jo snarks. “Try going naked. No way he won’t appreciate that.”

He scowls at his friend as he runs his fingers through his too-long hair. “Thanks, Jo.”

“She ain’t wrong,” Bobby adds. Jo and Bobby nod at each other, slapping a mental high-five.

“Not helping.”

“Don’t worry, Deanie Beanie, you have all day to get yourself ready,” Charlie smiles. “We’re kidnapping Bobby. We’ll have him back in time to see you two kids off!”

He rolls his eyes at her affectionately. She’s as excited as he is. They all are, and he knows it. “Thanks,” he says. They head out the door and he’s alone. Well, not exactly alone, but Cas is sleeping in his room after an overnight shift at the hospice. It’s tempting to forget everything and crawl into bed with him, but they haven’t crossed that line yet. Still, they are alone...

Creeping into his room, Dean watches Cas sleep. He’s utterly beautiful this way, his skin a golden contrast to the gray-blue cotton sheets. The temptation is too great. He slides across the mattress and into his side. He’s going to stop there, really, but his lips are drawn to his sculpted shoulder. He presses one, two, three kisses there, then another one, two, three kisses to the junction of his neck and shoulder. When he doesn’t move, Dean watches him a little longer, then presses another set of
kisses onto his neck, then another set to his jaw. He’s a remarkably sound sleeper, Dean marvels as he skims a finger along his cheek and to his soft, pink lips. Well, one more kiss won’t hurt, he thinks as he leans in.

To his utter surprise, he suddenly finds himself on his back, pinned to the mattress. “Shit!” he shouts as sparkling blue eyes hover above him.

“Gotcha,” Cas purrs, looking just like the cat who caught the canary.

“I knew you were awake, “ Dean lies.

“Sure you did,” Cas drawls, clearly not believing him. Dean might’ve tried to argue, just for fun, but Cas leans forward and inhales any further unconvincing argument Dean had on his tongue. He’s willing to lose this one, because he’s still winning. His hands wander along Cas’ bare back while Cas presses closer, the sheet wrapped around his middle the only thing stopping Dean from feeling all of Cas. He grips it tightly at the small of Cas’ back as he gently thrusts up.

“Dean,” Cas says breathlessly, “We’re supposed to wait for this.”

“I know, but we’re alone. How often does that happen?”

Cas rocks his head side to side in consideration before plunging back into Dean’s mouth. Dean groans, the intensity and the potential ratcheting up both his heart rate and his desire. He hasn’t done this in years now, always pulled away from his own wants by responsibility or guilt or fear. Maybe, in all those years, he could’ve had a quick fix in his office, or in some alley, or in his car, but he’s glad he never bothered because indulging in this with Cas, the man who has pushed him to give himself more, feels so much stronger, so much more right than anything he could’ve had with anyone else. It’s this thought that makes him whine when Cas pulls away. “I’m sorry,” he rumbles, voice rough from both lack of sleep and their heavy making out. “I want to—God, do I want to—but not yet. We haven’t had our first date.”

“Cas,” Dean cries, “we’re alone and we’ve known each other how long now? Do you really think it matters?”

“Yes, it matters,” Cas says softly, the tone surprising to Dean. “I’m not very romantic, Dean, but I know that I don’t want to treat you like you’re just anyone else. I want to do this relationship thing right, for once in my life. I want you to have what you deserve.”

Gazing up at Cas, Dean realizes he wants to do this right, too. He doesn’t want to fall into bed for their first time together just because it’s convenient or just because they’re horny or just because he’s afraid Cas might leave him if he doesn’t. And he wants Cas to feel like he’s special, too. “I want you to have what you deserve, too,” he responds quietly. “I want you to feel good around me, like you can relax and be yourself. We don’t have to rush. I just got a little carried away.”

“I’m not saying never. I’m not even saying not tonight,” Cas jokes. “I want you, believe me. Just...let me take care of you, hmm?” He kisses Dean’s cheek. “Let me spoil you?” He kisses Dean’s other cheek. “Let me show you how much I care about you?” He nuzzles his nose, then plants a kiss to the space between his brows.

Dean hums. “Keep doing that and you’re gonna break my resolve,” he murmurs.

“Do you like having your face kissed like this?” There’s a smile in his voice as he plants tiny pecks all around his face, avoiding his lips but kissing every other inch of skin there. Dean whispers in the affirmative, and Cas asks, “Which spot is your favorite?” When Dean shyly admits to having a
special fondness for the kiss between his brows, Cas smiles and presses extra kisses there. “That’s your glabella,” he explains.

“You’re right. You’re not romantic, Mr. Anatomy,” Dean teases. “It’s really called that?”

“Yes,” Cas answers. “Do you think I make shit up?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.”

“Go away. I’m sleeping.” He rolls off Dean with a pout and, sadly, takes his covers with him, hiding under them. Dean wonders if he teased the man a little too much. He’s still getting to know him in this way, after all. Maybe he’s sensitive about not being romantic.

“I was kidding, Cas,” he says, pawing at his shoulder. “Come on. Look at me.”

“No more glabella kisses for you,” comes the muffled reply.

“I love your Cinderella kisses.”

“Glabella.”

“Glabella. I love your glabella kisses.”

“Mmm. Faced with the thought of no glabella kisses, you try to kiss my glutes instead, hmm?”

“Aww, come on! I’m sorry!”

Cas pokes his head out of the covers. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. I’m just giving you shit. Now give me a kiss on my gnathion and get out of here.”

Dean has no idea what a gnathion is, so he smacks him with a pillow instead and leaves with one last, fond look at him before closing the door and heading out to do his errands before their date.

Managing to find a nice shirt and pants (that’ll be light for the hot day, which is fitting considering how much lighter his wallet is right now—he’s never paid eighty dollars for pants in his life), Dean treats himself to lunch at Sofia’s (informing them of his date with Cas with a gleeful smile), then searches for a hairdresser near the restaurant. He doesn’t want to just go to his regular barber, figuring a special night deserves a little more. At a small shop called Hair by Kenneth, the stylist is working with an older woman. Kenneth reassures him that he can take him in a few minutes, so he waits.

“Come on over,” the handsome stylist calls. He has a deep voice that reminds him of Cas. He smiles and sits. Cas would be proud of him for pampering himself a little. “What are we doing today?”

“Eh, just a clean-up, I guess. Whatever you think looks good.”

“Ah, a trusting one. Very good. Let’s wash you up.”

Dean loses himself in the feeling of strong fingers massaging his scalp. The shampoo smells like thyme and rosemary. Heavenly. God, he really should do this more often.

“Special occasion or just time to get it done?” Kenneth asks.

“First date,” Dean answers.

“Oh, well, you need to look extra nice, then,” he smiles. “You want to add on a hot shave?”
Mmm, yes. The guy laughs. He must’ve said it aloud, or his face said it for him.

When he doesn’t have a blade on his face, they chat about where Dean works, living in the area, his family, and so on, then talk turns back to the date.

“You nervous?”

“Nah. We’ve known each other for a while now, so it should be fine. I hope, anyway. He’s been burned before and I had to work pretty hard to get us to this point. If it doesn’t go well, he might give up on the whole idea, so it’s gotta go right.” He pauses and takes a deep, shaky breath. “You know, maybe I am nervous,” he chuckles.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. How’d you meet?”

“His friend Charlie, who owns the bakery across from Singer’s, where I work. She introduced us after I went in there whining about needing a nurse for a family friend. Cas interviewed for it. Guy had a fuckin’ stick up his ass, but damn if he didn’t know what he was doing. He’s so fuckin’ smart and cares so much about people.”

“Cas, you said? That’s an unusual name.”

“His real name’s even more unusual. Castiel.”

Kenneth frowns in concentration as he peers at each side of Dean’s head, determining if his sideburns are even. “That is definitely unique,” he murmurs as he straightens up, seemingly satisfied.

“Yeah. Kind of a mouthful, though.”

Kenneth smirks to himself and Dean, after a moment, understands how his statement sounded. “Well, I don’t really know that yet. Hoping to, eventually,” Dean grins.

“I bet,” the stylist says with a small smile as he scrutinizes his work and tousles Dean’s hair. With a final clip, Dean is declared done. “Like it?”

Dean does like it. He looks pretty damn good. He stretches and saunters to the reception desk. The total is a little more than Dean usually spends, but he declares it worth it. Dean is digging out his credit card from his wallet when his phone rings. “This is him,” Dean laughs as he shows the stylist Cas’ contact photo: a picture of him smirking and winking, one of the penis cookies from Christmas hanging out of his mouth. God, he’s so funny. And so hot. And we have a date. He hands his card over and answers, “Hey. Not backing out because of the glabella thing, are you?”

“Oh course not. Just wanted to let you know I’m going to run some errands, then head to Charlie’s to get ready.”

“Why?”

“So I can pick you up properly. Be ready for six.”

“Aww, maybe you are a little romantic.” He snickers at Cas’ grumbling. “See you then.” He hangs up, takes his card back, and signs the slip. “Thanks, Ken,” he says, giving a little wave and a smile before he turns and heads for home.

Six o’clock comes much sooner than Dean expects. Charlie, Jo, and Bobby all give him pep talks and tell him everything will be fine, but he’s nervous as hell. What if he doesn’t know which fork to use? What if he spills his food all over his lap? What if it doesn’t go well and Cas decides you’re not
worth it? The doorbell rings and Dean nearly jumps out of his seat. The collar of his shirt feels tight around his neck, even though it’s undone.

Charlie fusses over Cas at the door and Dean can hear him trying to brush her off. He imagines the smile and the blush on his face and relaxes. This is Cas—his grouchy, stubborn, soft and sweet Cas, who claims to be unromantic but stands at the door gazing at Dean with those blue, blue eyes and a red rose in his hand. “Hello, Dean,” his date greets him.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean smiles, taking the rose and trailing a finger along his date’s jaw. “Thank you. This was really thoughtful. No one’s ever given me flowers before.”

“It’s not too over the top?” he mumbles, eyes on Dean’s chest. The poor man is flushed to the tips of his ears. Dean still finds it amusing that Cas is cool in the face of fire, but melts when given affection.

“No, it’s perfect. Exactly how a first date should start. I love it.”

Cas’ mouth perks into a shy smile. The peanut gallery behind them starts to coo and fuss, so Dean hands off his rose to Charlie and ushers Cas out the door. “Horrible people,” he jokes. “I don’t know what we see in them.”

“Ourself, I suppose,” Cas deadpans. They burst into easy laughter and Dean feels the awkwardness slip away.

Cas takes him first to an Eritrean restaurant he’s never heard of (he’s never heard of the African country, either). They’re the only two there for most of the meal, which makes it feel more intimate. They each have a glass of honey wine and share a plate of Tsebhi Derho on injera, a flat bread. Dean’s never eaten anything quite like this, and it’s even more intriguing to eat it with their hands, as is done traditionally. The spices make his hands burn where they infiltrate the tiny cuts he gets at work all the time, and neither of them can get the aromatic scent of their meal off of their hands, but it’s great fun nonetheless.

“Did you like it?” Cas asks as they’re leaving.

Even if he’d hated it, he could never tell him that—he looks so hopeful, like a kid who really wants to make sure he got it right. Luckily, he doesn’t have to lie. “I loved it, Cas. That was awesome.”

“Think we could get Bobby to go there?”

“Yeah, right.” They laugh together at the thought of meat-and-potatoes Bobby trying out the exotic flavors.

They walk side-by-side to the gelato place down the street. It’s busy, given the warm night; they take their orders to go and stroll leisurely around the area and back to Cas’ hunk-of-junk Continental. “You need to get rid of this thing,” Dean comments, eyeing a large spot of rust. He imagines Cas’ feet eventually falling out of the bottom and him driving it Flintstones-style.

“I know,” he shrugs, then licks mango sorbetto off his lips. “I’ve been thinking about it.”

A sudden thought has Dean blurring, “Do you have enough money? I mean, I know the thing with Bobby doesn’t pay you as much as other places you could work. Don’t know how you do it, honestly. But if money’s a thing, I’m sure we could figure out—”

“Money’s fine, Dean,” he smiles softly. “I have plenty.” He starts the car and pulls out slowly into the street. “I don’t need much. I haven’t had a lot of bills, and I have money from my time in the Army and from—um, from my bio father.”
“Your bio father?” Dean asks, confused.

“Yeah. Long story. I’ll tell you later.”

Dean drops the subject. For whatever reason, Cas doesn’t want to talk about it now. He worries for a moment that he’s made things awkward, but Cas starts chatting about the cars he’s been considering and soon Dean relaxes.

They arrive at their next stop, a large, open parking area behind a building. “A makeshift drive-in,” Cas explains. “Very few people know about it, from what I can gather. You have to reserve it in advance, and if there are enough reservations, they play something.”

“Awesome,” Dean says, eyeing the large white wall of the building.

It’s an old 90s comedy that they listen to through an app on Cas’ phone. They share vanilla cream soda and kettle corn, which on top of the gelato gives Dean a bit of a sugar high. Or maybe that’s just sitting next to Cas, holding hands and sneaking glances at each other. He feels young and stupidly happy.

“One more stop,” Cas smiles when the movie’s over.

Dean wants to, badly, but it’s already nearly 11:00. “Actually, we probably need to get back to Bobby,” he says reluctantly.

“I was told Bobby would be all set,” Cas responds. “I don’t know how, but Bobby and Charlie both told me he was set and to take all the time we wanted.”

Whoa. Now he feels very young indeed, like a teenager out past curfew. “Lead the way, then,” he grins.

Cas takes them to a lake Dean’s never been to (because he really hasn’t had time for swimming or, you know, recreation in general) and pulls alongside the road. “This is the naked swimming lake,” he explains.

“Oh, with Charlie?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“So are we going naked swimming?”

Cas grins at him mischievously. “If you want.”

Several minutes later, they’re down to boxers and wading into the water. “Not quite as hot tonight as that night,” Cas comments as he stares into the distance. The moon and the few houses in the distance provide a dim light. “One ungodly hot day a few months after Trudy passed, Charlie was beside herself. She’d been tense and anxious all day and just incredibly cranky. Even Jo couldn’t be around her. So that night when I got home from the hospice, I took her out for a drive and we listened to as much shitty folk music as she wanted and we ended up at the lake. We sat on the sand for forty-five minutes in silence, then she ripped off all her clothes and jumped in. When she yelled for me to join her, I couldn’t say no.” He pauses. “Jo and Ellen and everyone at the bakery wanted to know what was wrong. They thought something terrible happened. But it wasn’t anything in particular. It was everything just falling down on her at once. She just couldn’t carry it all anymore. I’ve always thought of that moment she stripped down as her unloading all the weight of her life, just getting down to her basic self.” He chuckles. “I think that’s why I sleep nude. I need to shed.”
Dean smiles as Cas sinks to his neck in the water. He follows, sitting on the silty lake floor. “Another thing Midge taught you, huh? Shedding?”

Cas laughs. He dunks his head in the water, then rises. Shortly after, he flings something behind him to the shore and settles back into his position. Dean, though acutely aware that Cas is now naked, doesn’t feel aroused. Rather, he feels trusted. He mimics Cas’ actions and sits cross-legged. Their knees touch. Cas takes a breath and Dean holds his, sensing that Cas has something to say.

“At my mom’s burial my father—the man I called my father—gave me a letter and said, ‘This is from your father.’ He didn’t try to explain anything about the fact that I wasn’t his, but he didn’t have to. I’d known for a long time, because I remember the fight even though I was quite young and because my mother would talk about it from time to time, usually while drunk.” He sighs. “Our family was never the same after he found out. He rejected me and my mother, though he never bothered to divorce her. He just went on endless deployments instead and left us to fend for ourselves. So anyway, after the service I went home and read the letter. Chuck, my bio father, said he didn’t know about me the first few years of my life, and when he did find out and made contact with my parents, my ‘father’ told him to stay away so I wouldn’t be confused. I wrote him back, but to be honest I wasn’t expecting a response—Chuck’s letter was almost two fucking years old by the time it was given to me. But he wrote back, and we started a letter-writing relationship, just a few letters a year. He always answered. He was practically a stranger and he responded more than the father I’d grown up with.”

Dean watches him in the soft moonlight. His eyes look far away. He places a hand on his knee, hoping it’s welcome. Cas doesn’t look at him but lays his hand atop Dean’s.

“When I was twenty, Chuck and I finally met. We had the same blue eyes. He was a nice guy, a journalist. That’s probably where I get my affinity for words.” Dean smiles. He’s teased Cas about that on more than one occasion. “He told me about the circumstances of his brief relationship with my mother and answered my questions. I told him about her illness and that she passed away. He had no idea about my mother’s mental illness; I don’t think she was symptomatic then. He asked me about school and said he could help me more if I needed it, if the money he’d sent to my father for my upbringing and college over the years wasn’t enough.”

Dean feels Cas’ hand tense under his. He pries it off the man’s knee and enfolds it in both of his. Cas rasps, “That motherfucker had been keeping it from me. We were struggling and he kept it from me. I begged and stole to survive, and he had money that was mine and he kept it. Things were so bad once that I...fuck, you’re going to think I’m an awful person, but once I...offered myself to some guy in exchange for money.” His voice cracks on the last word as his lips tremble.

Dean, tears in his eyes, squeezes his hand. “I don’t, Cas. I don’t think you’re an awful person.”

“I didn’t do it. We agreed to terms and I got scared and couldn’t do it. When I tried to back out he locked the car doors and wouldn’t let me leave, so I pulled a pocket knife on him and told him to let me out. He reached for the knife and I cut myself and smeared it on his cloth car seat and told him my blood was in his car now, and that all I had to do was go to the police and tell them what kind of pedophile he was and they’d have proof I was there. I told him if he didn’t give me money and let me go that I’d do just that. It was so, so stupid, so unsafe. Anyway, he threw money at me and told me to get the fuck out, so I did. And we kept the electricity on for another month.”

Dean is horrified—not at what Cas did, but the lengths he had to go to just to live. “Fuck, Cas. I’m so sorry you had to do that.”

“Yeah, well, I was thirteen and desperate. But I never got that desperate again. I just...I couldn’t do it. Missouri helped us apply for aid when I asked, and I kept stealing food from stores and money
from charity boxes or whatever I could find to cover what the aid didn’t. Even though that guy was a piece of shit, I still felt bad for essentially mugging him. I’ve never stolen directly from a person since, and I always give to charity now. Trying to make up for my sins.”

Cas sighs, and Dean presses a long, sweet kiss on the bottom of his chin. “Your gnathion. I looked it up, once I figured out how the hell to spell it.”

A wet, choked laugh rings in his ears before he feels Cas’ lips on his glabella. “Thank you.” He pauses for a while and Dean waits him out. “So back to my father,” Cas continues. “I ended up suing him for the money. Thankfully, Chuck was a journalist and a scrupulous keeper of records, so he had enough evidence to support my claim. I won, but I had to sue my own pseudo-father to do it. It felt like a hollow victory.”

“Sucks.”

“Chuck felt horrible. He’d had no idea of the difficulties I had growing up.”

“But other people had to have known. Teachers? Your neighbors? Why didn’t anyone do anything?”

Dean feels Cas shrug. “Sometimes my mother was competent, and when she wasn’t, I hid it. And I was glad, you know. For a long time. I was glad that no one did anything, because I didn’t want to abandon my mother. But now, now that I have the perspective of an adult...I wish someone had intervened. Not when I was a teenager, because I think I would’ve just fought them, but when I was really young—eight, nine, ten years old. I wish someone had pushed things, asked questions, demanded to know why I missed so much school or why I was in the same clothes several days in a row or why I stuffed extra food from my free breakfast and lunch into my pockets. I wish someone had cared enough to push for what I needed, to stand up for me. I was way too tough and guarded for my age. It was a sign. It should’ve been a sign.”

This is why he’s so pushy, Dean thinks. This is why he pushes so hard for others to care for themselves, to get what they need. Anguish and affection swell in Dean’s chest. He straddles Cas, not caring that they’re both naked. “I’ll push for you,” Dean whispers. He kisses him with tender passion. Cas gives as good as he gets, surging into Dean’s mouth as his wet fingers slide across his back and into his hair.

When they separate, the moon emerges from the clouds enough for Dean to see longing and caution in Cas’ eyes. “I’m all grown up, Dean. I don’t need anyone to do that anymore.”

Not swayed, Dean cradles his face with dripping hands. “No, you don’t. You can take care of yourself. But I can take care of you, too. I can look out for you and make sure you’re getting what you need, like you do for me. I want to. Let me?”

A wry smile twitches in the corner of his mouth. “And if I say no?”

Dean shrugs. “I’ll annoy you until you let me.”

Cas laughs and pulls him into another kiss, this one full of hope. Dean feels the difference. “I’ve taught you too well.” He kisses Dean’s forehead, nose, and lips again, then says, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make our first date so damn heavy. But hey, we’re naked.” He grins and wiggles his brows.

“That we are,” Dean replies, letting Cas move on. He knows how exhausting it is to be emotionally naked. He leans into Cas’ lips and licks into his mouth, and they make out under the pale light of the moon without urgency.
When they start to shiver, Cas leads them out and dries them off with towels he brought from the car (“I was prepared this time,” he jokes). Cas pulls Dean toward him with his towel and into another kiss, sweet with affection. “I denied myself this a long time, but I don’t care if it might be wrong. I really want to be with you.”

Dean knows, even now, that Cas has his fears about their relationship being an okay thing to do. “It’s all relative, you know. Right and wrong. Something that’s wrong in one situation might be right in another. In our case, I think we’re pretty damn right.” He holds Cas close, thumbing at his hips. “We aren’t hurting anyone.”

“I know.”

“So let’s push each other to give ourselves something good for once, and let’s pull each other along kicking and screaming until we get it right. Okay?” Cas nods and kisses him with fervor.

They finish dressing and drive home hand in hand. When they arrive, they’re surprised to find Meg asleep in Cas’ bed. Bobby is sound asleep as well. “Well, son of a bitch. He let Meg help him,” Dean murmurs to Cas. “Unfortunately for you, you’ve lost your bed.”

“Doesn’t seem so unfortunate,” Cas shrugs, side-eying him. Dean smiles and leads him by the hand to his room, where they strip to nothing and slide under the covers together.

A thought occurs to Dean as he reviews their night. “Hey Cas, how come you don’t spend holidays with your father? Chuck, I mean.”

He hears Cas swallow next to him. “He went missing on one of his assignments overseas a couple of years after we met. They never found him. He was declared dead a few years later. That’s where the rest of my money comes from—his will and his life insurance. I was his only heir and beneficiary.”

Dean’s stomach sinks. “I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah. I can attest that money doesn’t bring you happiness.” He rolls over and sinks his face into Dean’s neck.

*Yet another loss.* “You won’t lose me,” Dean promises him.

Little did he know how soon their commitment would be tested.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Warning for the following:
- Grief (Charlie)
- Discussion of child exploitation and neglect
- Brief reference to blood
- Infidelity
- Reference to stealing

Another cliffhanger! Sorry! (Or am I?) <3

Next chapter: Fathers. Castiel could do without them.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I just love Cas so much in this chapter. Also, a little sexy surprise is waiting for you.

Warning at the end if you feel you need it. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fathers. Castiel could do without them.

“You’re kind of a pain in my ass, Mr. Singer,” Cas jokes as he settles Bobby into his chair.

“You haven’t been on a vacation in God know how long, and it’s been even longer for Dean. I’m tellin’ ya, son, it would do you both some good.”

“Listen, just because you like Meg more than me now doesn’t mean you have to push me out of the house.”

Since his first date with Dean a few weeks ago, Bobby’s been more and more insistent that the men get out of his hair and “go do something for yourselves.” It’s the gruff man’s way of saying he’s happy for them and wants to support them. “If that’s what it takes to get you two outta here, then fine. I like her better. Hell, at least go on another date.”

“We have.”

“Meetin’ up at lunch with me in tow ain’t a damn date. You don’t need a chaperone. Bad enough I gotta see you two swoon over each other here.”

“We just had a date last night!”

“A backyard date ain’t a date, Cas.”

And, well, they haven’t been out out since their first date, but only because things have been busy for both of them. Cas has been pulling a few extra shifts at the hospice to cover vacations and Dean has been doing the same at the garage. They’re both pretty tired, but confident that things will calm down soon. They are spending time together, though...lunches (with Bobby, yes) at the Roadhouse, movie nights after Bobby retires for the evening, and just last night, a wine tasting right in their backyard. It hasn’t been conventional, but neither one of them is complaining. He doesn’t think, anyway. “Is Dean upset?” he asks.

“Naw, not that he’s said to me. He’s too gaga over you. I’m just sayin’ that you two gotta pay attention to yourselves, too.”

He takes some time to mull over Bobby’s words as he rolls him into the living room. Dean is still sleeping. “Don’t you think it’s too early for a vacation together?”

“Hell, boy, you’ve known each other for almost a year now. I’d say you’re fine.”

“Well. Maybe another few dates first. Away from the house,” he adds when Bobby glares at him.
“Tonight. Take him out to Sofia’s. She’s been askin’ after ya.”

Bobby and Sofia have become fast friends since his visit to her restaurant. She visits him every week or so, as does Ellen. He’s more popular now than he’s ever been and, he begrudgingly admits, he likes it.

“Yes, okay. If Dean wants to.”

“If Dean wants to, pfft.”

He smiles at Bobby’s scoffing, then at his boyfriend as he wanders into the living room. “If I want to what?” Dean asks, rubbing at his face and stifling a yawn.

“If you want to go out tonight, just the two of us.”

“Hell yes.” Dean gathers Cas into his arms and plants loud kisses into his neck before resting there heavily.

“No falling asleep,” Cas teases, though he really wouldn’t mind. He adores sleepy Dean. They haven’t had sex yet, but they’ve gravitated to each other’s beds every night since their first date. “Sofia’s? Bobby says his girlfriend wants to see us.”

“She ain’t my girlfriend.” A blush pinkens Bobby’s cheeks. Cas chuckles and Dean smiles into his neck.

“Sofia’s sounds awesome. Give me an excuse to wear those pants again.”

“Might be a bit cool tonight for those.”

“Don’t care. I paid a shit-ton of money for them.”

“As you wish,” Cas smiles, pecking Dean on the head before letting him go. “Do I have time for a run before you head to the garage?” Dean doesn’t usually work weekends anymore, but he has a couple of interviews and a little paperwork he couldn’t get to during the week. Business has been very good.

“Anything to see you in running shorts,” Dean grins with a wiggle of his brows. Cas rolls his eyes before pinching his boyfriend’s cheek and setting the table for breakfast.

Dean is gone and Cas is teaching Bobby how to search online using his voice when he notices a truck pull into the driveway. They don’t usually get visitors they don’t know, save for the occasional child selling fundraiser items or a Jehovah’s Witness. When Cas sees a man—definitely not a Jehovah’s Witness, he decides—step out and approach the house, he stands and waits by the door. The man’s countenance puts him on edge, so he’s extra cautious as he waits for the knock. When the door begins to open without any warning, Cas slams it shut and locks it. He hears a curse as the man is sent backwards a few steps. He tries again, clearly not getting the message, and the knob rattles but holds firm.

A moment later, there’s a knock. Cas opens the door and guards the space.

“Who the hell are you?” the man spits.

“A question more appropriate for you, given the fact that you attempted to walk into a home you don’t reside in.”
“The hell you mean? I live here.”

“Really? Because I know everyone who lives here, and you’re not one of them.”

“The hell do you know?”

“Clearly more than you. For example, I’m oriented to person and place. Now, can I call you a psychiatrist?”

“Fuck you.”

“No thanks.”

“Cas? Who is it?” Bobby calls.

“I’m not certain, but I have a feeling.” He eyes the man scowling at him. “Do you want to see who it is?” At Bobby’s affirmation, he opens the door wider, though stops the man as he attempts to walk through. “You haven’t been given permission to enter,” he rumbles. He glances over his shoulder. “Bobby? You know him?”

“John,” Bobby says flatly. It’s Dean’s father, as Cas suspected.

“Bobby,” the man greets him with a nod. He tries to step in again and Cas stops him. “What the hell is your problem, boy?”

“You haven’t been invited in yet, boy.” He stares him down as he adds, “You need to wait until one of the men of this household gives you permission.”

He hears Bobby snicker. John looks over his shoulder. “Bobby, lemme in.”

Bobby rolls his eyes so hard his head follows. “Yeah, alright.”

John tries to push by him, but Cas stands rock solid in place. “Say please.”

“Fuck you.”

“You will be polite and say please or you’re not getting in.”

One reluctant please later, the man walks into the house and immediately flops onto the couch like he owns the place. Cas moves aside and gives them some space, though he doesn’t stray from the room.

“So who’s the bodyguard?” he hears John ask.

“That’s Cas. He lives here with us, helps me out.”

Hmm. He didn’t tell him about Dean and me. He decides not to read into that as he texts Dean:

To Dean 11:45am: Your father is here. Just didn’t want you to be surprised when you got home.

To Cas 11:56am: Son of a bitch. I’ll be home as soon as I can.

To Dean 11:57am: No rush. I’m keeping an eye on things. I won’t leave Bobby alone.

To Cas 11:58am: Thanks. XO

Cas smiles down at his phone. The good feeling stays with him until it’s time for lunch. Cas
mentions it to Bobby, who declines. He thought he might. He doesn’t bother offering anything to John, instead simply digging into the fridge for cold pizza and returning to his seat and his staredown.

The day gets worse when Dean gets home. “You should’ve called first,” he grunts when he walks through the door.

“What, I can’t come see my kid and my buddy?”

“You didn’t come here to see us. You came here to get money and a roof over your head until you blow town again.”

“Oh, you got a tough guy working for you now so I get an attitude? Who the hell do you think you are?”

Dean mutters incoherently as he turns his back on his father.

The rest of the day is tense. When it becomes apparent that John isn’t leaving soon, they quietly scrap their plans for their date, which makes the most sense but puts Dean in an even fouler mood. Just before supper (which Dean is making alone so he can sulk), Cas takes Bobby into his bedroom to change and use the commode.

“I can see why you chose to keep to yourselves for holidays,” Cas says with a wry smirk.

“Yeah.” Bobby shakes his head. “He don’t know that Dean’s gay.”

“I figured.”

“It ain’t about you. That boy adores you.”

Cas smiles. He knows the feeling. “I know. John doesn’t seem like the understanding type.”

“He ain’t. About anything.”

Cas nods grimly. “You going to eat supper?”

Bobby fixes his eyes on something across the room. “I don’t know.”

Catching his eyes, Cas says, “You have nothing to be ashamed of. If anyone does, it’s him.”

“Even when he used to help me eat, he used to make fun,” Bobby murmurs. It makes Cas’ blood boil, but he keeps his comments to himself as Bobby continues, “And shit, I know I ain’t gotta be ashamed. This MS shit ain’t my doin’. But I hate bein’ helpless in front of him. He just takes advantage. Always has. It’s worse now, though, ‘cause I can’t do anything about it.”

“Your body doesn’t work the way you want it to, but you have a voice. You can tell him not to treat you like that.”

“Ain’t done much good.”

Cas nods. “Well, I’m happy to be your backup. And look, he barged into your space, your life. You don’t have to stop what you do every day just because he’s here. If you want to eat, eat. If you want to go out, go out. If you want to listen to a book instead of TV, do that. He has no right to treat you like shit, especially not after everything you’ve done for him.”

“Yeah, well, just…do me a favor and keep an eye on him, that’s all. He likes to take advantage.”
It’s the second time he says that, so it piques Cas’ interest. “What do you mean, exactly?”

Bobby averts his eyes in shame. “Let’s just say all the ‘loans’ I’ve given him the last few times he’s come here ain’t been loans, and they ain’t exactly been voluntary.”

Cas feels his ire build until it’s puffing through his nostrils. He catches himself and calms his breathing. It won’t help Bobby. Instead, he says, “Does Dean know?”

“No, he thinks I loan it to him. As shitty a father as John is, Cas, I just couldn’t be the one to tell him his father does that.”

Cas says nothing. Bobby didn’t tell him not to say anything, and Cas isn’t going to give him a chance. “Do you want me to bring dinner in here for you or are you going to eat out there?”

Bobby doesn’t answer for a while, so Cas goes about his business, helping him with his personal care and getting him back into his chair. “I’ll eat out there,” he finally answers. Cas nods.

Supper is, like the rest of the day, tense. He eyes John with every bite, daring him to say something. He doesn’t. There’s no card game after since they were supposed to go out, so it’s a quiet evening of watching TV. Or it was supposed to be quiet.

“So how does a guy end up wiping asses?” John asks Cas. He’s into his third beer already.

“Do you not wipe your ass? Certainly you generate enough shit.”

Bobby and Dean turn wide eyes onto him, but he doesn’t care. Unless they tell him to stop, he’s going to make this man uncomfortable. Hopefully enough to leave.

“You must be a fag. Fags wipe asses for a living.”

“What gave it away? My limp wrist? My snappy comebacks? The fact that I like to screw people in the ass rather than be an ass and screw people over, like you?”

John scowls. “You got a lot of nerve. Can you back that up?” He stands unsteadily on his feet. Dean tenses at the end of the couch and starts to stand, too.

Rolling his eyes and subtly waving Dean down, Cas drawls, “Sit down, John. You’re drunk and it’d be an unfair contest even if you were sober.”

There’s a moment where it looks like John might not comply, but he eventually collapses into his seat. He says nothing further but washes down the rest of his third beer out of his 12-pack.

After John goes out to the kitchen for his next round of three, Bobby opts to go to bed early. When they’re alone, Bobby apologizes for John. Cas tells him not to worry about it. It’s not his fault his friend—or whatever he is now—is a hateful jerk.

Finishing up with Bobby, Cas peers into the living room and sees Dean and John talking, so he heads upstairs to clean up his room and change the sheets so John can use it. Cas assumes that John will be staying the night. It’s not his place to say anything, but he’d be kicking the guy out on his ass if he had any say. He pulls a couple of blankets and a pillow from the linen closet and a t-shirt and thin lounge pants from a drawer. No sleeping naked and no sleeping with Dean for who knows how long. Looking around the room one more time, he grabs his wallet and sticks it in the locked fire box hidden in the room next door that used to be Bobby’s office but now just stores junk. The box holds all the cash and Bobby’s debit card, too, since he convinced the men the cookie jar wasn’t safe or necessary now that he lives here. He puts the key in his pocket, then trots downstairs and tosses the
bedding onto a chair.

“Oh, I get the couch, too? Thought you people knew how to be good hosts.”

Cas barely refrains from his eye roll at John’s assumption that all gay people are born bed-and-breakfast owners. “You have my room. Second door on the right.” John grunts his approval and Cas doesn’t bother to suppress his eye roll this time. “I’m going to bed.” Dean gets up so that Cas can spread out the blankets. They have a silent argument about Cas sleeping on the couch instead of John, but Cas wins. He has an ulterior motive, after all.

John heads toward the stairs, then turns as his son lingers behind. “You coming or you stayin’ with the hired help?”

“Well,” Dean barks, but Cas catches his eyes and shakes his head. It’s not worth it. Dean’s face falls and he turns toward the stairs and climbs them, shoving past his father. John gives Cas an icy look that he returns. When he finally disappears upstairs, Cas breathes a sigh of relief and lies on the couch, his eyes staying open a long time despite his fatigue.

Some time in the night, Dean joins him. Cas lifts his arm to let Dean closer, then pulls him into a hug. Dean sinks into his touch. “I’m sorry, Cas. He doesn’t know. I should’ve...should’ve told him.”

“It’s okay, Dean.”

“No. I should be defending you. You’ve felt rejected by people who were supposed to care about you, and I don’t want to be one of those people.”

He feels Dean’s shoulders shake. Is he crying? “Dean?”

“I’ll tell him tomorrow,” he whispers, not looking at him.

“You don’t have to do that, Dean. If your life is easier not telling him, then don’t tell him. I don’t care. Really.”

Hot breath warms his neck. That breath turns to wet kisses, which turn to nips and licks as he moves along his collarbone. Cas groans quietly, not wanting to alert anyone to their activities. Dean groans in return, then hastens his movements as he adds a dirty hip roll to the mix. “Cas,” he whines, small and desperate.

With a growl, Cas shifts Dean under him and works him over, lips pressing into every spot of skin he can reach. With every muffled cry, every whispered plea, Cas peels another layer from Dean until he’s laid bare—all without stripping a single article of clothing from his body. “What do you want? What can I do?”

“Cas—oh—I just want—I want you,” he pants.

He’s been told this before—I want you. It usually means his partner wants an orgasm. He wonders if it means more for Dean…but it doesn’t matter. He’ll give Dean anything he wants. “I’ll take care of you,” he whispers. He pushes Dean’s t-shirt up, then kisses his way down to Dean’s waistband. He rubs his face along the column of Dean’s cock on top of his sleep pants. Dean moans and writhes, clutching onto Cas’ hair. It’s been so long since he’s done this for someone and he’s becoming turned on himself; he can barely contain his own moan as he mouths at his boyfriend’s cock. The pleasure is building—he can feel it in Dean’s body and hear it in his raspy cries. He knows they’re both clean, since they discussed it, so he tugs his pants down to take his cock in his mouth. He can’t see it well, but it feels plump and perfect. Dean jumps and wails in pleasure at the first contact; Cas puts a thumb gently to his mouth to remind him to be quiet. Dean, the beautiful asshole, takes it into
his mouth and laps his tongue around and around it, coupling that with long sucks. It breaks Cas’ concentration. Dean takes advantage.

“Come up here. Wanna taste more of you,” Dean begs him in a whisper. Soon he’s sitting up with a half-naked Dean in his lap, sucking on his neck. His eyes roll back when Dean slides down to his aching cock and swallows it. His technique is a little rusty, but his enthusiasm (and the saliva pouring down his chin) makes up for it. But you can’t lose yourself in this, he thinks as the haze starts to set in. This is supposed to be for him. You said you’d take care of him. He pulls Dean off gently and tries to switch their positions, but Dean won’t have it. They argue with insistent hands and mouths and frequent changes in position until Dean says, “Hey.”

“What?”

“Do you want me? Or are you just trying to give me what you think I want?” He doesn’t answer, so Dean continues, “Don’t do that. Not with me. I want you, not what you can give me.”

Cas can’t acknowledge how much the words soothe him, so he takes Dean’s face in his hands and kisses him deeply instead, hoping it says what he needs it to. Given the way Dean’s body grows heavy on him as he sinks into the kiss, he thinks it does. There’s no battling after that, both of them winning the tug of war by letting go of the rope and holding each other instead.

The fire builds steadily between them as they pleasure each other until Dean gasps “Fuck, Cas!” in a harsh whisper and comes all over Cas’ hand. Moments later Cas does the same, gripping Dean’s hair hard in his come-soaked fingers as he peaks soundlessly between them. Panting, he turns his face toward Dean in a post-orgasmic haze and presses his lips onto Dean’s jaw. Dean leans into it like an affectionate cat.

“Sorry about your hair,” Cas apologizes, though frankly he’s only sorry because Dean won’t be able to take a shower now without arousing suspicion. He loved making Dean dirty with Dean’s own spunk. He’d love to do it even more with his.

As if he read his mind, Dean slurs sleepily, “It’s okay. Don’t mind. Better if it was yours, though.” He traces a finger through a stripe of Cas’ come, which landed on Cas’ chest.

“Fuck, Dean, don’t say that. I’m over forty and I can’t get it back up that fast,” he chuckles against Dean’s skin. He pecks him on the cheek, then straightens and grabs the tissues on the end table to clean them. When he’s finished, Dean pulls him down and nuzzles into his shoulder until his breath begins to slow. Cas nudges him. “Go to bed.” He urges him up even as Dean grumbles. “Go.”

Dean pouts but stands. “I’ll miss you,” he says, jumpstarting a heart that Cas thought was long dead. It’s shocking, to use a pun. He has difficulty hearing it, so he deflects.

“You won’t miss having to fight me for blankets and then pushing me away because you get too hot.”

“Yeah, I will.”

Dean eyes him with such affection, it’s hard for Cas to believe it’s directed his way. He kisses Dean furiously. “I’ll miss you, too.” He slaps his ass to get him moving upstairs. When he hears his door close, he lies on the couch and falls asleep easily.

Things continue in the same way for a few days—John hanging around being an asshole, Bobby and Dean putting up with him, Cas giving him shit at every opportunity, and Dean visiting in the night. They do manage a few bright spots here and there, but the atmosphere is mostly cloudy with a
chance of bitching and passive aggression.

He watches John carefully throughout the week, as he watches anyone he doesn’t trust. Being a kid who had to look out for himself, he developed a bit of a sixth sense for when people were going to do him wrong. It was probably why, though he had wanted to trust Jonathan, deep down he never really did. Had he listened to his gut sooner, he could’ve avoided the whole mess.

John strikes in the wee hours of Friday morning, which doesn’t surprise him. He’s probably out of money for alcohol by now, or maybe he’s getting antsy. Predictable. Cas is on the couch, alert because of the time (baker’s hours, ugh) and because he hears the stairs creak. Dean has already come and gone. He hasn’t told his father about them yet, stricken with the fear of an abused child. Cas doesn’t fault him for it.

The man who gave 23 chromosomes to Dean (and little else) creeps into the living room and right to where Cas expected. Cas points his phone and shoots. The flash lights up the entire room and startles the older man.

“What the hell are you doing?” he growls.

“Catching evidence of your hand in the cookie jar.” He looks pointedly at the lid of the Wizard of Oz cookie jar in John’s hand. “Did you find the cookies I left you? Oreos.”

“I wasn’t doin’ anything,” he grumbles as he puts the lid back.

“Interesting, because I have a photo here that says otherwise.”

“Listen, you little fag, if you—”

Cas leaps from the couch and into John’s face, hovering above him and forcing him onto his ass. “No, you listen to me, you little fucker,” he hisses through clenched teeth as he jabs a finger at the man. “You’ve been a grade A asshole since you walked into this house, and long before that. Ridiculing a physically incapacitated man you call a friend? Dumping your responsibilities on your son until he barely knew who he was? Taking advantage of their kindness by stealing from them? Fuck you, you fucking waste of space, you fucking drain on the oxygen supply. You won’t be taking any so-called loans from them again, you hear me?” John says nothing. “I said do you hear me, boy?”

“Yeah. Yes. Fine,” he mumbles, looking away like the coward he is.

“And you stop using them as punching bags. Understood?”

“Yeah.”

“If you need something, you talk to them like a real man.”

John scoffs. “Like you’d know how to be a real man.”

It’s not even worth the witty retort. “Get the fuck out of here.”

John turns and heads up the stairs. After a few minutes, Cas heads back to the couch, though he doubts he’ll sleep. A faint voice calls to him. He gets up and shuffles into Bobby’s bedroom. “You okay, Bob? Need something?”

“You’re a hell of a man, son,” Bobby says quietly. Cas swallows against the tightness in his throat. He claps his shoulder, adjusts his hands so he’s more comfortable, and heads back to the couch, his
chest swelling with pride for protecting his family.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for:
- Homophobic language
- Exploitation of an incapacitated individual

So, how was that? I got so many “you’re my little bitch” vibes from Cas in this chapter. :D

Next chapter: So much good stuff, I can’t even sum it up. :)

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Ooh, something for everyone in this one! <3

*Some homophobic language, because John.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean’s learned a few things since his dad showed up last weekend. One, he misses Cas dearly. He’s grown so used to his welcome presence beside him at night and to his snarky humor, calming energy, and affection that he’s expressed more easily with every passing day that the absence of these things makes him feel hollow. He only gets his Cas at night when he visits him on the couch. He hates it. They should be together. Which brings him to thing two: his father didn’t change his ways while he was God-knows-where. He’s still the same bigoted, self-centered asshole he’s always been, or at least since his mother died. He’s never wanted to bother doing anything to rock the boat, though, because it’s always been easier to keep him appeased. That’s what he thought, anyway. That leads him to the third thing he’s learned: Dean isn’t the same person he used to be. He still has his faults, still isn’t as brave or as strong as he thinks he should be or as kind to himself as Cas thinks he should be, but he’s aware and he’s trying.

This week has exhausted everybody, and now more than ever, Dean just wants some time away with Cas. But how can he? His father’s always around and Cas won’t leave him alone with Bobby, not even for a couple of hours. Cas, the poor guy, hasn’t even taken any time for himself, never mind Dean. He hasn’t seen Charlie or Jo or anyone else since last Saturday, when John arrived. Cas needs a little time alone, and Dean sure as hell needs more time with him than a quickie on the couch in the middle of the night. A plan formulates in his mind.

“Bobby, you wanna head down to the garage today?” he asks. “Dad can come with us, and Cas, you can take some time off.”

“That sounds good,” Bobby says, nodding at Cas and then Dean.

“Yeah, it’d be good to get down to the garage again, see the guys,” John agrees.

“I’d appreciate the time,” Cas nods solemnly. “Thank you, Dean.”

“Not like you gotta hang out and watch us 24/7, there, Twinkle Toes,” John snipes, then sips his coffee.

“Don’t I, Cookie?” Cas growls with a pointed look. Dean watches the staredown with interest and suspicion. What’s going on?

John glares daggers at Cas. “You could make yourself scarce and give us some family time.”

“When it’s requested, I will.”

“Well, I’m requesting it.”

“Well, I don’t take requests from you.”
His boyfriend is so ballsy. Dean loves it. Still, he doesn’t want any further issues. “Okay, let’s get moving, then,” he says hurriedly as he stands.

Dean drives the three of them down to the garage, sneaking a kiss and making lunch plans with Cas before he goes. Bobby seems to know why he ran back into the house, but John doesn’t. Dean still feels guilty about not telling him yet. They arrive and John walks into the garage like he’s King Shit returned from war. Dean shares a disgusted look with his uncle as they follow.

The morning is spent listening to John tell stories of his glory days and giving advice to the mechanics. Garth and Rufus humor him, but the newer guys, Zeke and Jesse, don’t have much use for him, and Benny’s never liked him. The guys chat with Bobby and consult him on a couple of fixes. It seems to irk his father, but he keeps his mouth shut. Dean pops in occasionally and both Bobby and Benny wink at him, silently telling him things are okay. It’s a relief.

At lunchtime, Dean orders pizzas for everyone and insists they all take a break. He assists Bobby and easily hides the fact that he’s not eating himself. “I gotta head out for some errands. Be back in a couple of hours. You guys good here?” Everyone nods, mouths too full to answer verbally. He catches Garth’s and Benny’s eyes as he cocks his head toward his uncle. Receiving the agreement he hoped for, Dean smiles to himself and pops a minty starlight candy from the reception area in his mouth. He meets Cas at the Roadhouse a few minutes later.

Fuck, he looks good today. “Hey, baby,” he purrs as he pulls Cas in for a steamy kiss right in the parking lot. Cas, thank God, returns it eagerly, pressing him up against Baby and practically lifting him off his feet. He’s acted so cautious and distant this week (despite the hot couch sex they’ve been having) that Dean has been scared that he’s going to change his mind, deciding that the baggage that comes with Dean’s life is too much to carry. But the message now is anything but cautious and he’s becoming dizzy, both because of the passion Cas has for him and because all of his blood is rushing toward his dick. Cas makes him so damn weak in every way. “Fuck,” he breathes.

“Hello, Dean.”

“Hey.” Then, to make Cas weak and even the playing field, he strokes his stubbled face softly and whispers, “I’ve missed you so much. I couldn’t wait to get here and spend time with you.” He grins as Cas blushes and nestles into his shoulder. “Ah, there’s my Snugli.”

“Stop it,” his boyfriend chides.

“What do you mean, tesoro mio?” he asks, remembering the endearment their favorite Italian ladies call him.

“Stop it!” he cries with an embarrassed laugh and a squeeze of Dean’s waist. He tugs him toward the door. “Come on. Lunch. And hey,” Cas pauses in his steps, “I’ve missed you too.”

Dean can’t help but kiss him again.

This is exactly what we needed. Dean thinks later as they sit adjacent to each other, sharing onion rings. Cas is his usual self, telling Dean about his morning spent with Charlie at the bakery and seeing the SAHMs.

“So they harassed me before you and I got together, and now they’re harassing me because we’re together. I’m telling you, I’ve never met dirtier people than these women.” Dean laughs. Having met them a couple of times now, he understands. “And then Charlie comes over, of course, because I’m not being tortured enough, and she goes on about some guy and another couple of women coming in and asking for me or about me or whatever, and that gets them into a conversation involving group
sex and custard and I just had to walk away.” Dean cackles now, folding into himself. “And then, then Jo comes in because this is my life, and she drags me out of the kitchen and tells them all about the Sunday before last when we all got together and she called you and me “sickeningly sweet,” so then they launched into us getting married and what gorgeous kids we’d make together even though it’s physically impossible. And then Lacey said it would have to be a group marriage because I already have umpteen wives and Jo tells them the foursome story and I told them I was divorcing them all.”

“You loved it,” Dean teases, kissing Cas playfully and repeatedly through his denials. “We would make gorgeous kids, though.”

Cas snorts. “You can give birth to them.”

“Hope to God that’s an automatic C-section.” They laugh enough to get the attention of the other patrons, but neither of them mind. “You can be my baby daddy and my nurse.”

“Hot,” Cas grins. “Should I wear my scrubs in the delivery room? Do the whole nurse vibe?”

Scrubs are shapeless cotton with ties and snaps and unattractive designs and hell yes Dean wants to see him in scrubs because it taps into all of his doctor fantasies. “Don’t think I’d be able to focus on the birth,” he replies with a grin that he hopes isn’t too excited.

“They’re not that attractive.”

“Speak for yourself.”

Cas raises his brows. “I see roleplay in our future.” Dean’s mouth waters. Hell. Yes. “You are so transparent,” Cas laughs.

“I don’t fucking care because roleplay.” He bites his bottom lip. Cas’ eyes follow. Dean slides his hand to Cas’ thick thigh. Cas’ pupils widen in interest.

“Do I need to hose you two down?” Ellen says as she brings them drink refills. They sit back with sheepish grins. She smiles, then feathers her hand through Dean’s hair. “You two probably haven’t had a lot of time together. Tough havin’ your daddy in town?”

Jo must have told her. Or Cas. Or the asshole’s reputation precedes him. “Yeah.” It was a loaded question and he gives an equally loaded answer.

“Well, you don’t let him stop you from livin’ your life, okay? I’m sorry he ain’t welcome here, but you and Bobby still are. And the girls miss you, too. Don’t be strangers.” She gives him a kiss on the cheek that’s so loving it makes him want to cry.

They wrap up lunch and Dean reluctantly heads back to work. The afternoon moves swiftly and he hears a few laughs, which is nice. They get home to the awesome smell of Aunt Karen’s meatloaf.

“Cas, that smells amaz—” He stops. Cas is wearing navy blue scrubs that bring out his eyes and hint at the smoking body he knows is underneath. “Scrubs.”

“Yes. Quite comfortable.” He breezes by Dean and takes Bobby into the bedroom to change and stretch.

“What’s your problem?” John asks. Dean shakes himself out of his reverie and bustles around the kitchen, grabbing plates and glasses and willing himself to calm the hell down.

He wears the damn scrubs all through supper and even for their card game. Gabe and Zar come over
to join them. They’re very well-behaved, which makes Dean think Cas warned them that he’s not out to his father. The scrubs are gone by the time Dean comes to visit Cas during the night. “You friggin’ tease,” Dean growls.

“You dirty bastard,” Cas grins.

On Saturday Dean spends the day with his father at the garage, just for Cas’ sake. Cas always looks like he wants to pop him. When they come home in the evening, the house is packed and Cas is dressed up. It makes Dean salivate. “Where you headed?” he asks.

“Date,” he says. Dean’s stomach falls like a cartoon boulder off a cliff as Cas waves and heads out the door.

“And we’re here to hang out with Bobby,” Gabe says. Meg, Charlie, and Benny are there as well. “I want a rematch from last night. He kicked my damn ass.”

“And we want to watch the humiliation,” Benny jokes. “Gonna order Chinese. You wanna see the menu?”

Before Dean can say he can’t eat because he feels like throwing up, Benny sticks his phone under Dean’s nose. Instead of an online menu, there’s a note.

Tell us you already have plans to meet up with Aaron and Zar. Cas is waiting for you at Sofia’s.

“Uh, actually,” Dean says, then repeats the story he was given. Everyone nods as Benny surreptitiously closes out of the note and hands his phone around with the actual menu. Dean just barely keeps himself from skipping down the hall to shower.

Giulia smiles broadly at Dean when he arrives. “Caro,” she says, kissing his cheek. “Your love waits for you.”

Dean grins and doesn’t correct her as she leads him to their table, where Cas waits with a bottle of wine. When he approaches, Cas stands and embraces him. “Sorry to scare you,” he whispers.

“Oh, that’s fine, only lost a couple of years of my life there,” Dean says, only half-jokingly. “You were busy today.” He notes Cas’ haircut and close shave.

“Yes. I cashed in some favors. Benny and Aaron owed me for their stupid stunt,” Cas grumbles. The whole fake attraction thing still irked him. “I told them I’d let it go if Benny stayed at the house and if Aaron covered for you should it be necessary.”

“A kind, forgiving man you are,” Dean teases, chucking his boyfriend under the chin.

They start with the bruschetta again and follow it with a pasta dish with mussels and calamari this time. Dean doesn’t expect pasta and seafood to go together, but it does. They wrap it up with tiramisù. The best part of the entire meal, though, is the way Cas looks at him. It’s like nothing he’s ever experienced before.

“Oh, you two. È amore,” Sofia gushes when she comes to say hello. “I am so happy for you both.”

Dean knows what she said, or at least the gist. If Cas’ red face and shy smile are any indication, he knows, too.

After dinner, Cas tells Dean to follow him to Charlie and Jo’s, where they find the house empty. “What did you need here?” Dean asks.
“You,” he rumbles as he closes the door and locks it, then leads him to his old bedroom. “I just need time with you.” He captures his lips in a kiss full of feeling. They stumble blindly to the bed, where they make out until Cas says, “Wait here.”

When Cas returns, Dean’s eyes pop out of their sockets. “Fuck me,” he whispers. Cas is decked out in his full Naughty Nurse uniform—tight, partially unbuttoned shirt, a skirt that just reaches below his ass, fishnet stockings, and black, thigh-high boots.

“After a thorough exam,” Cas purrs.

Dean hears words like “blood pressure” and “temperature” and “active lifestyle,” but he really can’t play along when Cas is fucking his fingers into him and sucking his dick at the same time. He’s on the precipice already and Cas is still fully dressed. “Off,” he rasps as he tugs at whatever he can reach.

Cas smiles and does a striptease, peeling off his shirt, then the boots, then the stockings. “Now,” he says, “shall we fuck with the skirt on or off? Or would you like me to put my scrubs on instead? I know you like those.”

Dean groans as he considers all of his wonderful options. The skirt is wild and interesting to him, but he’s been thinking about those scrubs obsessively for the last twenty-four hours. “What do you want?” he asks.

“I want you to make a choice for yourself,” Cas replies. He pulls the navy scrubs out of a bag on the floor at the foot of the bed. “Choose.”

“Scrubs,” he whispers, closing his eyes. He loves all the effort Cas put into the nurse uniform, but the scrubs are way more Cas, and the color and simple lines of the uniform remind him of the suit Cas wore for his interview. Oh fuck. A suit. Will Cas fuck me in a suit? He knows exactly what he’s doing. Well, might as well play along.

“Nurse,” Dean pants, “want you to eat me out.”

“Nurse, Mr. Winchester,” he winks as he lifts Dean’s legs and oh fuck.

Cas grants him his every request (as long as he says “nurse”), and soon Dean can’t stand it anymore. Seeing Cas in his medical garb has him hurtling toward the edge. There’s just one thing that would make it even better...in all of his doctor fantasies, he’s the one doing the fucking because the doctor loses his mind and has to have him, begs for Dean to fuck him because fuck the rules, Dean, I want you and I don’t care if I lose my medical license, take me, take it all... And though Cas has thoroughly prepped him, he screws up his courage and whispers, “Cas? Can I fuck you instead?”

Cas scrutinizes him for a moment before he obliges with a smile and a nod as he strips off his pants. Grateful and excited, Dean sucks him down while Cas preps himself, which gets Dean so hot he knows he’s not going to last. When he’s ready, Cas climbs on top and rides him, much like the night of the Christmas Eve party, and the sight of the sexy nurse gyrating above him while Dean jerks him off is too much. He comes hard, the aftershocks sweeter when Cas comes moments later all over his chest and rubs it into his skin. He eases off Dean and pulls off his shirt, then lies bare-chested in the mess of ejaculate. They rest quietly for a while, listening to their synced breathing.
“That was really great, Cas.” He kisses the top of Cas’ head, but then starts to panic. Cas was so weird about them starting this relationship, and his job was a part of that. “Was it okay for you? Wasn’t too weird to do the whole nurse thing?”

“No, it was fine,” Cas says. Dean’s silence must confess his doubt, because Cas adds, “Really. In a strange way, it changed my perspective a bit. Being your ‘nurse’ was clearly just a game and had nothing to do with our real lives. It just highlighted for me that I’m not in that role for you in real life.”

“Good,” Dean smiles. “Sorry about, uh, switching things up on you. The clothes and our, uh, positions.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad you said something.”

“It was even better than my fantasy.”

Cas hums and squeezes him around the waist. “Was the costume too much?” he asks quietly.

“No, not at all. I liked it. I just like the scrubs better. Thought about ‘em a lot. Are you mad?”

“Of course not. I’ve never done anything like that before, Dean. I was just trying things out. Sometimes you don’t know what you or your boyfriend will like until you try.” He taps Dean on the nose. “And I think you like your men manly.”

“I do,” he laughs. “Not that I’d argue with the costume again. Why do you have that, anyway?”

“Charlie had a costume party and Trudy wanted to pick the costumes. I thought when Trudy said ‘sexy nurse’ I’d be going as myself, but…”

Dean bounces Cas’ head as he laughs. “So cocky.” He kisses his head again. “You don’t happen to have an old suit you don’t care about, do you?”

Cas props himself on his elbows and smiles slowly at Dean. “I’m sure I have something.” He leans down and captures Dean’s lips in a gentle kiss, then presses their foreheads together. “Thank you for trusting me with this and for being honest with me. You share yourself with me in ways no one else ever has, and…it makes me want to do the same. Everything is so different with you. I don’t know if it’s you or me or us together, but I—I know maybe I’m jinxing myself and I’m gonna get royally screwed, but I…I’m glad, anyway. I’m glad I took a chance on you.”

Dean gazes at Cas’ open, vulnerable face. Maybe he should be a little offended that Cas thinks he could screw him over, but given Cas’ history, he’d be cautious, too. He has been cautious, actually. Too cautious. “Tomorrow, Cas, I swear to God,” Dean whispers.

Cas frowns. “Tomorrow what?”

“I’m telling him tomorrow. Or tonight, even, when we get home.”

“Dean…”

“No, really.” He sits them both up and takes Cas’ hand. They should probably take time to clean up and dress, but this is more important and they seem to have important conversations naked anyway. Taking a deep breath, he continues, “I know maybe you’re scared to say it, so I’ll say it first: I love you, Cas. And even if you can’t say it, I know you feel it. I can tell, and so can everyone else. And you don’t deny someone you love. You hold them up, treasure them.” He palms Cas’ face. “Tesoro mio. My treasure. You’re more important to me than whatever shit is gonna happen with my father.”
Cas’ eyes are hopeful but sad when he says, “Dean, I don’t want to come between you and your father.”

“Cas, you have been a pain in my ass ever since I met you about having my own life, doing things for me. This is me choosing my life. Choosing you.”

His boyfriend’s eyes begin to water. “Dean.” Long moments pass while Cas gazes at him. “I… I feel it, but I can’t say those words. They carry so much negativity from my past, from people who let me down. I’m sorry.” Dean knew, and it’s okay, though he’d secretly hoped he’d be the exception. Cas looks so sad, though, that he can’t possibly be upset. But before he can reassure him, Cas’ sadness is replaced with a sudden, surprised breath. “But I can say”—Cas cradles his face—“ti amo. Ti amo tanto.”

Dean doesn’t need to know what it means to know what it means. “Ti amo,” he repeats back to Cas, pulling him close. “Ti amo.”

They make love this time, not focused on orgasms but focused on pouring their love into every touch. They come anyway, their fluids mixing where they rutted together, then they lie love-drowsy in each other’s arms for a while. Eventually, they shower and clean up the bedroom, Cas joking that perhaps he should burn the sheets instead so as not to insult Charlie’s delicate lesbian senses. Dean laughs, thinking of how Charlie’s lesbian senses are far from delicate. They dress each other in their clothes from earlier, kissing and touching softly because they can’t get enough, then drive their separate cars back home.

In the driveway, Cas stops Dean. “What you said earlier…you don’t have to do it. Certainly not tonight. He’s probably been using.”

“Yes, I do, tesoro mio. Know why? Because ti amo.” He caresses Cas’ warm, pink cheek. “And I’m not denying you one more minute.” He takes his hand and leads him into the house.

All eyes turn to them and everyone smiles cautiously except for John. “The hell are you doing holding his hand? Did he lose his way?”

“No, Dad.” He steels his nerves. “Cas is my boyfriend.”

“Your what?”

“Boyfriend. Man I’m dating. Man that I love.”

John looks puzzled, then angry. “You… love him?” He stands and approaches. Dean’s heart is racing, but he holds his ground, though he grips Cas’ hand a little tighter.

“Yeah, Dad. I love him.”

John tsks. “One more disappointment to add to the list.” He folds his arms. “I didn’t raise you to be a fucking fag.”

Dean explodes. “You barely raised me at all! Bobby and Karen raised me more than you ever did, and they did a hell of a good job. They kept me sane, they gave me a semblance of a childhood and a sense of family, they gave me a trade and a business and a chance to become better than you.”

“Better than me? What the hell have you done that’s so great? You’ve been in this hick town most of your life, never went to college, you’re in Bobby’s house, and you’re almost forty and you’re playing nurse to one guy and buttfucking another!”
Cas is vibrating with rage next to him, but is holding back. Part of him wants Cas to stand up for him, but he knows it’s more important that he stand up for himself. “What have I done that’s so great? I’ve been a loyal nephew to my uncle, and I’ve maintained a successful business, and I stuck around when things got hard. I’ve made great friends. I’ve pushed my way through a lot of fear to have this man beside me. I’ve made myself someone I’m proud of. That’s what I’ve done. What have you done?”

“I gave you life and I gave you a roof over your head and food in your mouth, and I was there for you after your mother died.”

“Funny, that’s not the way I remember it.”

Squinting and with his mouth twitching, John sneers, “You ungrateful asshole. No son of mine is gonna talk to me like that—”

“I’m no son of yours, because you’ve been no father to me.”

John steps toward him, and this time Cas doesn’t stop himself from stepping forward. “Back off,” he growls. Benny, Gabe, Meg, and Charlie, rolling Bobby, come to Dean’s side as well. Dean is strengthened by the absolute love he feels surrounding him.

“I’m not gonna be in the same house with a pansy son and his fruity fuckbuddy. I’m out of here.”

“Don’t let the door hit you in the ass,” Dean snarls.

And just like that, the hurricane that is John Winchester is gone, off to wreak havoc somewhere else.

For the first night in a week, he has Cas back in his bed, right where he wants him. He snuggles into Cas’ side and lets himself be held.

“Sucks,” Dean whispers in the dark. “Thought I’d feel better. I do, but I also feel kind of lost.”

“I know.” And Cas does know, of course.

“Does that go away?”

“Not entirely. It fades, for sure. I think that feeling of ‘what if’ or ‘I wish’ sort of takes its place.”

“It’s true, though, what I said. Bobby’s been more of a father to me than him. Don’t know what me and Sammy would’ve done without him. Huh. Wait’ll Sammy hears this, huh?”

“He’ll be quite impressed.”

“Yeah.” Dean pauses, playing with Cas’ fingers. “I’m so ready to have a little peace and quiet. Normal, you know? Go on dates. Have people over for dinner. Hang out in the living room in our underwear.”

“I don’t think Bobby would appreciate that.”

“Hey, he can hang out in his, too.”

Cas shakes the bed with his laughter. “I’m looking forward to some calm too, and maybe a little R&R. Bobby said we should take a vacation, just us. What do you think?”

“Vacation? Just us?” He’s excited just thinking about it. “I mean, if he thinks he can work with someone else while we’re gone, then yeah, we should definitely try to make it work once things calm
down and get back to normal. Think we’ve earned a vacation from our crazy lives.” Dean drapes his arm across his boyfriend and sighs. “Ti amo, Cas.” It’s still new, but already he loves saying it.

He loves it even more when he hears Cas say it as he hugs him tightly. “Ti amo, Dean.” He drifts off, secure in Cas’ arms.

Chapter End Notes

So, what was your favorite part? <3

Next chapter: Is there any such thing as security?
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Is there any such thing as security?

This one’s a little rugged, guys. Warning at the end if you feel you need it. <3

Security is a false construct, but people desperately believe in it because without it, there’s fear and despair. Castiel knows this. He’s seen a lot of fear and despair in his life. Felt a lot, too. And though he knows there’s no true security in this world, he tries to make his world as secure as he can anyway. When he was a child, he begged, borrowed and stole to make sure they always had food and housing. With his friends, he gave the attention and affection that made them want to stay. In the military and at his jobs, he made himself indispensable.

Today, he’s having an alarm system installed.

It’s been just over two weeks since John’s departure, and Cas has slept very little. His mind is too alert, too focused on John coming back. He’s not afraid of the man, but he does have some concerns about what he might do. He thinks about him breaking into the house. He thinks about him harassing Dean or Bobby at home or the garage. He thinks about him being a holy terror around town and Dean feeling compelled to clean up his messes once again. He thinks about him making a report to the licensing board about his relationship with Dean. That one he worries about the least. He thinks he could make an argument about the ethics of his choice, and if not and he lost his license, he’d still care for Bobby for free and find another job. But he’d rather not go through the hassle and he does love his work and wants to keep doing it.

He hadn’t shared his concerns with Dean, not wanting to stress him out when things were finally settling down again, so he had to endure an argument:

“We’ve survived how long without an alarm system, Cas?”

“I just think it makes sense to have an extra layer of protection for Bobby in the event that we aren’t here and something happens.”

He won the argument, thankfully.

“This is a lot of fuss, Cas,” Bobby grumbles when the installation tech comes to wire the house.

“Yes, and you know why I’m concerned.”

“He’s never tried to break in and steal from us before.”

“He never had to. He just took what he wanted. Now he has a reason.”

“He’s a pretty crafty son of a gun. He didn’t live totally off the money he got from us.”

“Well, no sense in taking any chances. Besides, like I told Dean, it is an extra layer of protection for you, and for all of us. And I’ll sleep better, okay? This whole thing has me stressed.”
Bobby scrutinizes him for a minute before he softens. “Yeah, alright. Don’t wanna see you up all night worryin’. That’ll just worry me, and we’ll both be grumpy sons of bitches.”

“Exactly,” Cas smiles. “Now, how about steak subs today?” It’s a silent thank you for capitulating to Cas’ need to protect his little family and to not revisit the horrible hypervigilance of his youth. The last three weeks of it have nearly made him sick.

The installation is quick, the explanation thorough, and soon they are arming it for the first time and heading out the door to surprise Dean, Charlie, Kevin, and Channing with lunch.

“Bless you,” Dean calls when he walks through the door of The Bee’s Knees. “Coffee and lunch. I could kiss you.” And he does, repeatedly, making Cas laugh.

“Lunch, yes!” Charlie cries when she is called out of the kitchen by Kevin. “And two hot guys making out in my bakery. This porno writes itself.” She grins as she takes a tray of drinks that Channing prepared and brings it to the table.

“Lunch is the plotline for your gay porno?” Dean asks as he pulls away from Cas’ lips. He misses Dean already but tells himself to stop being so damn needy and sits.

“You would totally watch food porn, Dean. Don’t lie.”

Dean makes a considering frown as he sits next to Cas. The opportunity to make his boyfriend blush is too good to waste, so Cas whispers in his ear, “I have a bowl of pie filling I’d love to slather all over you.” Dean doesn’t say a word, but his cheeks are the color of the strawberry-rhubarb filling he was considering. He laughs and kisses Dean’s glabella while Dean mutters “asshole” under his breath.

They eat and listen to Charlie carry on about her wedding coming up on Sunday afternoon. It’ll be a simple ceremony followed by a gathering at the Roadhouse. He’s never seen his friend so happy, and he’s very happy for her. Sometimes late at night, usually after a trying day with her mom’s illness, they would talk about their futures. Charlie, for all her optimism, had a hard time envisioning a future that included marriage. She thought she’d be her mother’s caregiver forever. When she was able to acknowledge a time when her mother would be gone, she still wasn’t sure that marriage was for her, even though she was dating Jo by then. Others tried to argue that she’d want to get married someday, that she would long for that security and that she just needed time. He never tried to argue that point with her. There was no security in marriage. His parents’ marriage was a prime example of that. When she eventually dipped her toes into the idea of marriage, he simply reminded her how much she loved Jo and encouraged her to keep herself open. He’s glad his pessimism on the topic never bled through to her. He never wanted her to be bitter like he was.

Being with Dean has softened his bitterness, though, and when they’re walking down the short aisle a few days later in matching suits, he can almost see the appeal of marriage, or of a wedding, at least. It’s intoxicating to dress up and declare your feelings about someone. And he doesn’t really have a problem with that part, per sé. It’s what happens after the wedding that he struggles with. Do people really take the vows they say seriously, or are they just repeated without thought? In good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. Most people don’t think about what that really means. He’s seen too much in his life not to think about it. There’s a false security in those vows, because when it comes right down to it, only half the people in the U.S. follow them, the rest divorcing and trying again. And none of the numbers he’s ever seen include the ones that stay but don’t fulfill their vows—cheaters, liars, abandoners, abusers, and so on. It’s rather bleak, when he thinks about it.

Dean nudges his shoulder as they’re about to part. “Stop thinking,” he whispers before planting a tender kiss on his lips. A corner of his mouth ticks up in a surprised, pleased smile—Dean knows
him that well and it’s still startling to him—and he takes his hands and presses his lips against Dean’s once more as a thank you before they separate.

“Making out at my wedding, I see how it is,” Charlie teases the pair later at the reception. “You are the talk of the entire crowd. After how ravishing my bride and I are, of course.” She side-hugs Jo, who blushes.

“You are both incredibly beautiful,” Cas says, choosing not to acknowledge the rest of her statement. They’ve been hearing talk of how they’re “the next ones” all afternoon.

“You guys are next!” Jo says, adding to the day’s tally.

“I don’t think we’ll fit into the dresses,” Dean deadpans, punching laughs out of all of them. Cas is watching them flit away to their other guests a few minutes later when Dean sneaks behind him and wraps his arms around his waist. “I think Bobby’s getting tired. Let’s get him home, and later on we can play dirty, dirty honeymoon, hmm?”

Cas laughs and enthusiastically agrees. And if their lovemaking that night is more thoughtful and heartfelt than dirty, well, neither of them seem to mind.

The security system, Dean’s unfettered affection, and their frequently traded ti amo do wonders not only for Cas’ sleep, but for his general well-being. He hadn’t realized how draining it could be to be physically and emotionally on high alert all the time. They relax into a rhythm—Dean working at the garage and coming home to Cas and Bobby, Cas caring for and spending time with Bobby and cutting back to one fill-in shift a week at the hospice so they had their overnights together most of the time. Life feels as it should, Cas thinks, and he feels happier and more secure than he ever has.

It should have been a sign.

On a Sunday night a couple of weeks after Charlie and Jo’s wedding, Dean is fretting. “Are you sure you don’t want to come? Just for a couple of hours?”

“No, you go ahead.” The three men had taken to going out once a week to watch sports at a local bar and grill that was more restaurant than bar (which made it easier for Dean to tolerate), and they usually invited a bunch of friends to join them. There was no restaurant tonight, though. Tonight they were all gathering at the home of their new neighbors, Jesse and Cesar. Dean had told Jesse about the little house down the street at work one day, and he and his husband checked it out and fell in love with it. They were Bobby’s kind of guys—smart, kind-hearted, and level-headed, with little tolerance for bullshit. Bobby had been looking forward to seeing them and their new pups, a pair of Labs. He begged off, though, saying he was too tired. He’s been in a quiet funk a good portion of the day. “Bobby and I are going to hang back and watch the Vikings lose so Bobby can weep without an audience,” he grins, casting a sidelong glance at the man.

“Shut your cakehole,” Bobby barks. Cas cackles, punching him playfully on the arm before heading into the kitchen for soda, chips, and salsa.

“Okay. Hey.” Dean beckons him to the door. “You’re not feeling left out or anything?”

“No, caro,” he teases, kissing Dean lightly on the nose. More seriously, he reiterates, “No. I promise. Go hang out with the guys. They’re waiting for you.”

“Allright. I’ll see you later. Wait up for me? I wanna show you the cabins I found today for our vacation.” With the alarm system installed, Dean had finally convinced Cas that they could do a long weekend away. “Plenty of ‘em right on the lake.”
“At foliage prices, probably,” he grunts, but he’s smiling. “Can’t wait. See you later.” He gives him a peck on the lips and a smack on the ass as he shoos him out.

“You coulda gone, too,” Bobby says after Dean leaves. “Coulda set me up in my room with the TV. I’d’ve been fine a few hours. Not like I’m not ever alone.”

“I know that, Bobby, but honestly, I’d rather be home tonight.” Despite enjoying everyone’s company, he hadn’t been in much of a mood to go out, and Bobby’s malaise merely cemented that for him. “I have to work an overnight tomorrow night, anyway. Better to just keep things low-key.”

“Alright, then. Pile that salsa on a chip for me, would ya?”

“You got it.”

At the end of the first quarter, the Vikings are up 7-3. Bobby is rubbing it in. By the end of the first half, though, Bobby’s lost his steam just as the Vikings have. “They’ll get it back,” he mumbles. His words slur when he’s tired.

“I’m sure they will,” Cas says in a tone that clearly implies his opposite belief.

“Give ya the finger if I could.”

“I bet. You done?’

Bobby nods and Cas takes away the food and drinks. He loads the dishwasher, humming to himself as the commentators blather on between an assload of commercials. Just as the second half is starting, Cas comes back to his seat next to Bobby, who’s now out and sounds like he’s snoring a bit. He never realized Bobby snores. He shakes his head fondly. “You want to get to bed? Might be more comfortable than the chair.” He tries again when he gets no response. “Bobby?” He pokes his shoulder, then shakes it when he gets no response. “Bobby?”

Unresponsiveness and...that's not snoring, it's agonal breathing. “Shit!” he hisses as he feels for a pulse. Nothing.

Cas blows into the straw that alerts Bobby’s emergency response program, then hoists him out of his wheelchair and onto the floor with brute strength. He folds his hands together, one on top of the other, and begins hard, steady chest compressions. One and two and three and four and five and

“Mr. Singer, this is the Emergency Response Call Center, do you need help?” a tinny female voice asks over the speaker of the unit that sits in a corner of the room, followed by two beeps.

“Yes, we need an ambulance. Mr. Singer is in cardiac arrest,” Cas says as he continues compressions, using his body weight to compress the two inches into the chest necessary to keep his heart pumping blood through his body. Thirteen and fourteen and fifteen and

“Mr. Singer is in cardiac arrest and needs an ambulance sent to 125 Birch Lane, is that correct?”

Beep beep. Twenty-one and twenty-two and

“Yes.”


Twenty-four and twenty-five and cracking and twenty-seven and twenty-eight and twenty-nine and thirty and
Cas tilts Bobby’s head up, opens his mouth, and gives two breaths. One and two and three and four and five and

“An ambulance has been dispatched to 125 Birch Lane. Is there anyone offering CPR?” Beep beep.

“I am. I’m his nurse.” Eleven and twelve and

“Please keep performing CPR until help arrives. Help it on its way.” Beep beep. Sixteen and seventeen and “Is there anyone who can meet the ambulance at the door?” Beep beep. Twenty and

“No. Call his emergency contact.” and twenty-two and twenty-three and broken and sweat and

“His emergency contact is Dean Winchester at 215-555-0701?” Beep beep. Twenty-eight and twenty-nine and is that his number? and tip and


“Please stay on the line while we contact Mr. Winchester.” Beep beep. One and two and three and four and five and six and seven and eight and nine and ten and eleven and twelve and thirteen and fourteen and fifteen and sixteen and seventeen and eighteen and nineteen and twenty and twenty-one and twenty-two and twenty-three and twenty-four and please and Bobby and twenty-six and twenty-seven and be okay and thirty and tip and

Breathe. Breathe.

One and two and three and four and

“Mr. Winchester has been contacted and is on his way.” Beep beep. Seven and eight and nine and ten and

“Thank you.”

Cas hears the familiar sound of a siren, its insistent wailing getting louder as it draws closer. Twelve and thirteen and fourteen and fifteen and

The door slams open. Sixteen and seventeen and eighteen and “Cas! What the hell happened?” Twenty and twenty-one and “I found him unresponsive and not breathing.” twenty-four and twenty-five and

“Oh my God. What do I do, what do I—”

“Wait outside for the ambulance.” Thirty and tilt and

Breathe.

“I’m not leaving him!”

Breathe.

“Dean.” One and two and

“I’m fine, I’m not leaving—”

“Dean, flag down the goddamn ambulance!” Five and six and
 Without another word, Dean disappears outside.  *Seven and eight and keep it together and eleven and twelve and*

The sirens screech to a stop.  *Nineteen and twenty and twenty-one and*

Two new voices crowd into the space.  *Thirty and tilt and*

*Breathe. Breathe.*

“He’s a nurse.” Dean.

“Sir, we’re going to use the AED.” A woman.

*One and two and three and four and five and six and*

A man cuts Bobby’s shirt off and wipes his chest, then places adhesive pads in place.  *Seventeen and eighteen and nineteen and twenty and*

“Stand clear,” the woman says. Cas finally lifts his hands from Bobby as she places the AED paddles on him. The machine reads his heart rhythm and recommends a shock. “Stand clear,” she says again, then the machine delivers the shock. Immediately after, the man performs two minutes of CPR, then checks Bobby again.

“Got a pulse and breathing,” he says. “Let’s move him.”

*Breathe, Cas. Breathe.*

As they ready Bobby to be transported, Cas rattles off the information the paramedics need, using all of his professional jargon as if Bobby’s just another patient. He sees Dean out of the corner of his eye, hovering as his uncle is transferred to the stretcher. The paramedics are quick and efficient, and soon Bobby is being led out, Dean following.

When the house is empty, he realizes he’s still kneeling on the floor, but he can’t bring himself to move.  *You have to move. You have to make sure he’s cared for properly.* His arms feel heavy and strained, like he’s carried weights around all day. He’s cold now, his sweat too efficient at its job. Breathing is difficult and his head is buzzing. He’s not sure he can drive, but he has to.  *You have to. For Bobby and Dean. If Dean even wants you now.* Yet he doesn’t move.

“Cas?” He looks up, surprised, toward Dean as Dean falls to his knees in front of him. He thought he’d left. “You okay?”

His tone is too gentle, too understanding. It feels wrong. He turns his head down and away. “I was supposed to take care of him, keep him safe.”

“You did. You did, Cas. Paramedics said you gave him a fighting chance. Probably saved his life.”

“I don’t know how long he was like that. I broke his ribs.” He stares dully at a crumb on the floor.

“Look at me. Look at me.” Cas lifts his head. “You did everything you could, Cas. You did good.”

Tears of exhaustion and mixed emotions flood his eyes. He wipes them away, but they keep coming. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Dean says, enveloping him in his arms. “I don’t blame you for this. I don’t blame you.” He feels Dean’s gentle hand smoothing his hair. “Ti amo, Cas. Please believe me.” He rocks him gently back and forth as he continues to stroke his hair. The fear that Dean would hate him for
everything that happened tonight starts to ebb as he lets himself be comforted. “You can’t keep us safe from everything. But it’s okay, ’cause we have each other. Just don’t push away from me, or I’m gonna have to go further to pull you back.”

Despite himself, Cas huffs a small, wet laugh. He can easily picture Dean dragging him back by his ear.

“Can you get up and go to the hospital with me? Do you feel okay? Need to be checked?”

“I’m okay,” Cas says, separating from Dean and standing up. His arms tremble; his back and wrists ache. “Tired and sore but okay. Are you okay?”

“Good as it gets right now, I guess. I got you, so that helps.”

Cas squeezes his arm, then quickly finds his shoes and jacket. He stops at the door and arms the security system. Dean takes his hand as they leave the house, Cas closing the door tightly behind them.

“Dean?” Cas stops his boyfriend with a tug.

“Yeah?”

Fresh tears fill his eyes, but he doesn’t bother to wipe them this time. He takes Dean’s face in his sore, shaking hands. “Ti amo, Dean. Ti amo tanto. Ti amo sempre.” He draws Dean into a long kiss and a longer hug that Dean returns with no qualms, no hesitation, before they make their way to Dean’s car.

There is no real security in this world, but there is Dean. And for Cas, that’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

Warning for the following:
-Emergency requiring immediate medical intervention

*Deep breath* Okay, how are you?

Next chapter: A family reunion, stress, and old habits.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

We’re not our best selves when we’re stressed.

Hello! Sorry I’m posting a bit later in the day. I was editing the hell out of this chapter. The chapter and I needed to communicate better, like our boys. We came to an understanding. :)

No major warnings, but there are some medical things happening (extubation), and Cas and Dean have some discussions that might feel uncomfortable because they’re not pretty feelings or topics (though they’re quite real). Love to you all! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Come on, Sammy, pick up,” Dean mumbles. He knows it’s early—still dark there, and the sun is just lightening the sky here—but Sam would want to know sooner rather than later. And he needs to hear his brother’s voice.

“‘Lo?”

“Sammy,” Dean croaks.

“Dean? Dean, what’s going on?” Sam asks, sounding very awake now. “What’s wrong?”

“Bobby…he had a heart attack.”

“Oh God…oh Dean, fuck…”

“He’s alive,” Dean clarifies, hearing the tears in his brother’s voice. “He’s alive, thanks to Cas. He’s having surgery.”

“Okay…okay. Shit. Okay. Lemme see when the next flight out is. I’ll make arrangements for Amelia to keep Allie and I’ll be out as soon as I can. As soon as I can, Dean. Promise. No fighting me on this.”

Dean lets out a small, raw laugh. It wouldn’t have been all that long ago that he would’ve done just that, insisting that he could handle it on his own. “Not fightin’ ya. Need to see you.”

A surprised sound echoes over the line. “Oh. Good. Okay. I’ll get right on it. You doing okay?”

“Yeah.” He wipes at his face. “Well, not great, but you know. Okay. Cas is here and that helps a lot.”

“Okay, good. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Sammy. Love you.”

There’s a brief pause before Sam replies, small and pleased, “I love you, too, Dean.”

He hangs up and leans on Cas, thinking about all the wires and tubes and bags that were connected
to his uncle. It reminded him of Aunt Karen during her cancer treatments. He hates all of it, but at the same time he’s grateful. The alternative is too much to think about right now.

“He looked so fragile,” he whispers to Cas.

“He is. We all are. But fragile things are often the toughest, too. You. Me. Bobby. Your Aunt Karen. Spirits. Hearts. Fragile and strong.” Cas kisses his head.

“Yeah.” He sniffs and grips Cas’ shirt as he gasps, “I don’t want him to die. I feel so bad.”

“Why do you feel bad?”

Dean clutches at his hair and tugs. “I...sometimes I...I used to just...I mean, I didn’t want but…” He can’t say it. It’s there and it eats him up, but he can’t say it. How can he? It will reveal the selfish bastard he is. He doesn’t want Cas to know that.

“You’ve wished for it to be over sometimes.”

Fear and shame clench his heart. It wasn’t even a question. How did Cas know? Is he that obvious?

“Dean, I wished that with my mom. Charlie wished it with hers. Bobby wished it with Karen.”

Dean straightens. “No way in hell—”

“He told me.”

Frozen and incredulous, Dean whispers, “He did?”

“He did. We were talking once, and in that conversation he told me he thought he was a burden. I told him he was.”

Abhorred, Dean backs up. “Cas!”

Cas looks unaffected by Dean’s reaction. He rubs Dean’s thigh. “Then I told him we all are, every one of us. A burden is simply a load that is carried, Dean. We carry people like luggage on the trip of life, and yes, some are heavier than others. But do we leave them behind to make the trip ‘easier’ on us? When they’re harmful, yes. But usually we keep and carry them because we need what’s in them—the care and the humor and the mirror to ourselves. We want to carry them. And when we want what we’re carrying, they don’t feel like they weigh us down. They make us stronger, lift us up. They feel like lifesavers.” Dean thinks about that as Cas continues, “Bobby had the same reaction as you when I said, ‘Wasn’t Karen a burden, and wasn’t she a heavier burden when she was sick? Wasn’t it difficult to deal with the constant appointments and the lack of sleep and the terrible heartbreak of watching someone you love suffer?’ He felt guilty, too. But then I said, ‘And wasn’t it worth it? Weren’t you happy to carry her, because you loved her? Didn’t you want to carry her, even with everything? Didn’t she make you stronger?’ And he got it. And he told me that yes, it was harder and yes, sometimes he wished it was over, and yes, even at its worst, it was always worth it. She was always worth carrying.

“It’s no use denying the difficulties, Dean. But with the right people in your life, the difficulties are worth it.” Cas caresses his face, his smooth, warm hand giving comfort and absolution. “Don’t feel bad because you feel drained sometimes, or because it’s a pain in the ass to find a restaurant that has wide door openings and no steps or because you can’t be spontaneous and it irks you sometimes. These are just annoyances, and humans feel annoyed a lot. It doesn’t mean that you’re bad. You keep going despite the annoyances, despite the difficulties, and you do it with grace. That’s the difference between an asshole and a guy who just has some wishes for himself.”
Dean swallows hard against his hot, narrowing throat. He swings a leg over Cas and sits on his lap, hugging him with his whole body. “He’s worth it,” he rasps.

“Of course he is. That’s what I told him. Then I thanked him for carrying my heavy, burdensome ass.” Dean chuckles into Cas’ neck. “And you’re worth it, too, you know.” Cas’ lips to his temple soothe his frayed nerves. “I’m glad you called Sam.”

“Me too.” He sighs. “Couldn’t do this without you, Cas. Thanks for being here.”

“There’s nowhere else I want to be, as long as you and Bobby want me here.”

“We do.” Dean rubs his face on Cas’ shirt. He snuggles into his arms—the same arms that have held the sad and desperate, have given a chance at life, have cradled the dead. The arms that have surrounded him when he was sad, that gave him a chance at life, that helped him bury the regrets and self-denial of his past. “Ti amo, Cas.” The arms hold him closer as he falls asleep.

“Sweetheart,” a voice whispers hours later. His face is hot and damp from his own breath and the heat of Cas’ neck. “Caro. Charlie and Jo are here.” He sits up, still fuzzy from stress and sleep.

“We came as soon as Cas called,” Charlie said, wedging her way between the men to hug and kiss Dean. They’d decided to wait until the morning to contact anyone except Sam and Benny, who Dean texted only to say that Bobby was alive and he wouldn’t be in. Cas must’ve called the women while he was sleeping. “How is he?”

“Don’t know yet,” Dean answers hoarsely as he accepts a hug from Jo. They both hug and kiss Cas, then back off so Dean can turn around and sit in the vee of Cas’ legs. “Should be out soon.”

“I called the garage, too,” Cas says. “They were very worried. I told them the basics and said you’d call when you were ready to have people come by. That didn’t stop the ladies, obviously.” He raises a brow at them.

“It’s okay,” Dean smiles thinly. “Thanks for doing all that.”

The four sit in an awkward huddle of bodies until a man approaches. “Mr. Winchester? I’m Doctor Worthey,” he says, directing his attention to Dean. “Mr. Singer did well. We performed a coronary artery bypass graft surgery. A narrowing of one of his coronary arteries led to his earlier cardiac arrest. We bypassed the blockage using a vein graft…”

Dean nods and just keeps nodding. None of the information is really sinking in. Cas squeezes his arms and rubs them, the friction creating heat. He hadn’t realized he’d gotten chilly.

“Can I see him?” he asks when he no longer hears the doctor’s voice.

“You may, briefly, but we have fixed visiting hours and only immediate family is allowed.”

Anxiety makes his stomach churn. He shivers. “But I—I don’t want to leave my uncle. And I want Cas. He’s my boyfriend.”

“Unfortunately, we really can’t—”

“I’m also Mr. Singer’s RN,” Cas interrupts.

The surgeon blinks, but continues, “I understand, but multiple visitors traipsing in at all hours can be harmful—”
“Actually, studies suggest that allowing flexible visitation with loved ones benefits patients. It decreases anxiety, increases safety and quality of care, and reduces cardiac complications and length of stay.” Dean glances behind him to see Cas’ face. It’s the same challenging look he gave Dean during his interview a year ago. He cheers internally.

The surgeon sighs. “Sir, be that as it may—”

“You want your patients to have optimal outcomes, do you not?”

“Of course. However, the rules—”

“We'll take up our issues with the unit and the hospitalist. Thank you. Dean will contact you if he has any further questions before we see you again.” With that, Dean feels himself being walked toward the Intensive Care Unit. They say goodbye to Charlie and Jo at the doors, then make their way inside. He’s not sure how he does it, but Cas manages to get them both into Bobby’s room.

Bobby is out for several hours. During that time Cas forces him to drink water and eat in the waiting room, staying with Bobby while he does so. When Dean gets back, they switch. Cas explains the gibberish the surgeon tried to explain to him, then tells him what each machine that’s hooked to Bobby does for him. As scary as it is, it’s comforting to have Cas there to explain things, as well as to provide emotional support. He can’t imagine doing this alone.

Just after supper, Bobby wakes, groggy and confused. He glances at them but his eyes seem unfocused, and he drops off to sleep again soon after.

“He had major surgery, Dean. This is normal,” Cas assures him.

Sam arrives just after 8:00 that night. When Dean gets the text, he rushes out to the waiting area to see him, and is surprised to see Allie in tow. “Hey, you guys,” he croaks, voice haggard from fatigue.

“Dean,” Sam cries, pulling him into an embrace that lasts a long time. “How is he?”

Dean updates him on Bobby’s condition, keeping it vague for little ears.

“Can I see him?”

“Should be able to. Cas was getting growly enough so that they were letting him do whatever. Then he ran into someone he used to work with at shift change and it’s been smooth sailing since. She, uh…” Dean nods toward Allie and shakes his head. “I’ll stay out here with her.”

“Thanks.” He pulls Dean into another hug and whispers, “Sorry. Amelia was being a bitch. She wouldn’t take her because she had some overnight thing planned with the new guy.”

“Wow,” Dean murmurs back. “Room 5,” he says, then claps Sam on the shoulder and points the way. Sam’s gargantuan frame disappears through the doors, leaving him alone with his niece. “So, guess you’re gonna miss school, huh?”

“It’s okay,” she shrugs. “Can we get some crackers from the machine? I’m still hungry.”

“Sure, sweetheart.” He takes her hand and they walk down the hall. She chatters happily about this and that, and Dean forces himself to relax a little, if only for her sake. He buys two tiny bags of fish-shaped crackers, then leads her back to the waiting area, where Cas sits.

“Thought I’d give them some time alone,” Cas says. He nods at the little girl. “Good evening,
“Allison.”

She nods solemnly, as Cas did. “Good evening, Castiel.”

“And how are you today, signorina?”

“Very well, uh…”

“Signore,” Cas whispers with a wink.

“Signore,” Allie repeats. Dean chuckles. Last time they visited, over Christmas, the two had started an odd yet charming game in which they would greet each other formally every time they saw each other. When Cas taught her the Italian words for Miss and Mister, the game took on an even “fancier” tone, to use Allie’s word.

The three of them hang out in the waiting area, Dean stealing a cracker or two. Sam comes out after a little while, looked peaked. “You alright?”

“Just tired,” he reassures him with a yawn. “I should get Allie ready to go, though. I know she won’t be tired for a little bit, what with the time change, but she needs some downtime at least.”

“Yeah, sure. Take my keys. There’s an alarm system now. Code is 45114. His bright idea.” Dean tilts his head toward Cas. “Car’s in the lot.”

“The bed in the extra room already has clean sheets. Some of my things are in there, but the bed hasn’t been used in a while.” Cas shifts his eyes briefly toward Dean, and though it’s been a long twenty-four hours he can’t help but grin at his boyfriend’s shy smile. “The inflatable mattress she used last time is in the closet.”

Sam nods but doesn’t take the keys. “Cool, thank you. We have a rental car, so no worries. We’ll see you guys.”

Once Sam and Allie leave, it’s another long night at the hospital. The lone chair in the corner is supremely uncomfortable for two grown men, but they make it work. In the morning, Dean wakes to see Bobby looking at him.

“Bobby!” he cries, sitting up quickly and startling Cas awake, too.

Bobby’s eyes flicker in greeting. Dean is so relieved he feels like he might pass out. Or that could just be the fact that he hasn’t had breakfast, or that Bobby still has all the damn tubes, including the one down his throat. It’s making weird sounds. Before he can ask Cas, though, a physician comes to check on him, then declares him ready for tube removal after an evening of slow weaning off the ventilator. The process is easier than he expected, though it sure as hell doesn’t look comfortable. After what feels like an eternity, Bobby speaks.

“What’re y’all idjits doin’ watchin’ me sleep?” It’s a little slurred and hoarse, but it’s unmistakable. Dean’s eyes well up and he approaches Bobby and takes his curled hand.

“Somebody had to make sure you didn’t pull out all your tubes and walk out of here, Mr. Singer,” Cas says from behind him.

“Ha, fuck you,” Bobby replies with a wry, tired uptick of his lips.

“Vikings lost, by the way.”
“Balls.”

Dean laughs harder than their little exchange really warrants, but at the moment he’s overwhelmed with hope. His little family is safe and sound.

There’s a flurry of activity over the next couple of days. Dean and Cas never leave the hospital, while Sam is in as much as possible, Allie happily spending time with Charlie and Jo when her dad is gone. On the third day, Bobby is transferred out of ICU to a cardiac care unit. His color and his trademark affectionate gruffness have returned, so between them Dean and Cas call anyone they think would want to see him. He is inundated with visitors—Charlie and Jo, Ellen, the guys from the garage, Sofia and Giulia, Gabe, Zar, and Meg, and, much to everyone’s surprise, his former brother-in-law and sister-in-law. Bobby seems happy to see everyone, but particularly touched to see Karen’s family, and they him. He’s not sure how Cas arranged it, but Dean knows he did. There’s only one person who doesn’t visit, despite being informed, but that’s not a surprise. A disappointment, yes, but not a surprise.

By Thursday, two particular visitors have worn out their welcome.

“You two need to get outta here. I’m sick of your faces,” Bobby barks as best he can to Dean and Cas.

“I don’t wanna—”

“I don’t care. Y’aint seen a shower in a few days now, and y’aingotten to sleep in yer own bed, and I want you gone.”

“Bobby—”

“They got nurses and doctors here, Dean. I’m fine, and I’m gonna be home soon.”

He loses every argument he lobs at Bobby, and when Sam and Ellen agree to split the evening while Allie stays with Charlie and Jo, Dean reluctantly agrees and heads home with Cas, though he grumbles all the way.

“It’s his way of showing you he loves you,” Cas says.

“I guess.”

“If you let go of the guilt, I think you’ll find you’ll enjoy a shower, a hot meal, and an actual bed.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Cas is right, of course. The shower feels incredible, and when he comes out Cas has prepared one of several freezer meals dropped off by their friends. He’s never loved mac and cheese more. Cas takes his shower right after dinner, and Dean lies on the couch and enjoys the quiet for a while. He hadn’t realized how exhausted this whole thing’s made him until his arm slips from his side as he starts to drift, knuckles bouncing off the floor. He doesn’t bother to shift his position. A few minutes later, he feels droplets on his face. “Cas.”

“Dean. Come to bed.”

“It’s, like, 7:00.”

“So? I bet you could fall asleep now. And if not, you can relax in other ways.” His face is impassive, but Dean’s belly leaps and a small grin creeps across his face. Dean takes Cas’ outstretched hand and
lets him lead the way upstairs.

He’s not sure if Cas actually meant sex, but he pounces on his boyfriend as soon as the door closes. He suddenly needs to feel something. After several minutes of lazy making out that doesn’t scratch the itch under his skin, Dean begs “Fuck me, Cas” against his lips. Cas agrees, but he’s slow and gentle and it’s frustrating as hell. “Faster, fuck me hard,” Dean pleads.

Cas pauses, licking his lips. “I don’t know...”

“Caaaaas—”

“You’re exhausted and emotionally compromised, and I d—”

“Please?”

“—on’t want you to regret it later—”

“I won’t!”

“—or use it to push away other feelings you’re having, and besides that, I—”

“Don’t I get to fucking decide what I want, Cas? Isn’t that what you’re always telling me? I want you to fuck my ass hard. That’s what I fucking want right now. Please.”

With a harsh exhale, Cas buries his cock hard, as Dean requested. At first it’s just what he needs—it’s physical release, it’s grounding, it’s a reminder that he’s here and alive. But Cas’ face is buried, too, silent and hidden in the crook of Dean’s neck. He’s getting what he asked for, yet Dean feels even more disconnected and numb than before. “Cas?”

“What?” he asks flatly, stilling his hips but not looking at him.

Dean frowns. “What’s with the attitude?” It isn’t what he was going to say, but now his hackles are up.

“I don’t have an attitude. I’m just giving you what you want.”

“You could sound a little happier about it.”

The silence in response is deafening. “I apologize,” he finally says against Dean’s skin. “If this is what you want from me, I will give it to you. Do you want me to continue?”

Dean agrees and Cas resumes, but it doesn’t feel right and he wants to scream. Tears burn under his lids; he tries to stop them but they leak out, pushed by stuttered breaths and the ache in his heart. Cas notices and stops immediately, lifting his head and meeting his eyes. “Dean, sweetheart.”

Cas’ voice—his Cas’ voice, not the strange, distant voice of the man who wouldn’t even look at him just a minute ago—opens the floodgates, and a torrent of tears streams from his eyes. He lets himself be held as he weeps, not even fully cognizant of his reasons. Cas kisses every teardrop. This release, this feeling of feeling is just what Dean really wants, what he wanted all along but couldn’t define. He presses into him and begs him not to stop. Cas threads his fingers through Dean’s hair and continues kissing him until his tears abate. When they do, Dean rolls them over; he holds his boyfriend’s face gently and kisses his salty lips until they’re both hard again. This time, making love feels honest and good, the pace just what Dean had hoped for but now with the connections both to himself and to Cas that had been lacking. He rides his lover, hands pressed onto his shoulders and eyes locked, until he comes with a shout, Cas following inside him with a shudder and a throaty sigh.
Dean falls onto him and they stay wrapped together for a long while.

“I’m sorry, Cas. I don’t know what the fuck got into me before.”

“Stress. Powerlessness. You’re not your best self when you’re stressed.”

“Not an excuse.”

“No, but a reason. And I wasn’t my best self, either. I made everything about you and just capitulated instead of pushing myself to tell you how I was feeling and what I wanted so we could talk about it. It’s an old, bad habit of mine.”

Dean swallows. He hadn’t even thought about Cas feeling anything but calm, confident, and competent, like he always seems to. Cas has been his rock through this whole ordeal. “How were you feeling?”


Regret fills Dean’s chest. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. You’ve been taking such good care of me, and all that time you were feeling like crap and I didn’t even notice. I just thought of myself and how stressed and numb I’ve been, and how I needed to just feel and be close to you. Fuck, what a fuckin’ lousy excuse of a boyfriend I am. Shit.”

“Dean.” Cas’ fingers comb through his hair tenderly. “You’re a wonderful boyfriend. You’re just stressed. We both are.”

“Yeah, but Cas, I didn’t even ask you what you wanted. I didn’t ask you...anything. Fuck. What did you want?”

“I…” Cas stops, looking reluctant to continue. Dean arches a brow (not as good as Cas, but it gets the message across), so he finishes, “Honestly, I just wanted to...rest? To just be?”

“To shed,” Dean murmurs. Cas hums in agreement. “Fuck. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, Dean. We’re good. We’re stressed-out idiots who could stand to talk more, but we’re doing our best and we’ll keep trying. We’re good. Okay?”

Dean burrows into Cas’ neck. “Okay. But we both gotta do better, okay? We gotta call each other on our shit.”

“Alright, caro.”

Dean’s lips twitch in amusement and affection before his mood darkens. “You know that asshole won’t even come to see Bobby?”

Cas seems nonplussed by the abrupt subject change, as if he expected it. Maybe he did. Sometimes Cas seems to know him better than he knows himself. “I’m not surprised.”

“I shouldn’t be, I guess. Just when I think he can’t be a worse human being.” Cas huffs in response. “What?”

“There’s something you should know.”

Cas tells him about the coerced “loans” from both the cookie jar and Bobby’s small checking account. Dean’s fists clench in rage. “The fucking asshole. I can’t believe I’m related to him.”
“Well, like we’ve said before, blood isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Still true,” Dean sighs. “Bobby, the girls, you...none of you are blood, and you’re the best family I could imagine.”

“I don’t think you’d want to be related by blood to me, Dean.”

It’s dark, but he knows Cas is smirking. “You’re right,” he purrs as he reels him in for a kiss. “And tomorrow morning before we go back to see Bobby, I’m gonna make you really glad we’re not related by blood.”

They both laugh stupidly hard at the silly come-on, and Dean feels at peace for the first time in days.

Chapter End Notes

If you’re interested in the info Cas mentioned about visitors and patient outcomes:
https://www.advisory.com/daily-briefing/2016/08/05/icu-visitor-policy-improve-patient-outcomes

Next chapter: Betrayal, survival, and Dean takes care of Cas. <3
Cas and Dean spend a lot of time at the hospital over the next few days, but are shooed out each night after supper by Bobby and commanded to return in the morning. Emotions are up and down, but once they get over their old hangups and patterns and talk, Cas finds their evenings are much smoother and more relaxed. Having Sam and Allie around helps. It gives Dean people to fuss over; Cas is uncomfortable with people trying to do too much for him. He does love Dean’s affection, though, his sweet words and easy touches growing easier once again by the day. He wonders if maybe they could go on another date before Bobby gets home, since they had to scrap their weekend getaway.

Cas finds Dean in the kitchen, making coffee. “You want to go on a date with me tonight?” He wraps his arms around Dean’s waist and sways their hips in sync.

“You tryin’ to dance with me, sweetheart?” Dean leans back and lets himself be rocked.

“Maybe.”

Turning, Dean winds his arms around Cas’ neck and says, “I was so jealous the day I saw you and Charlie dancing.”

“When was that?”

“When I came to ask you to come back? You were singing to her? Channing recorded it?”

The memory resurfaces. “Oh, yeah,” he chuckles. “I was a little embarrassed you caught me.”

“Are you kidding? It was adorable. But it wasn’t with me so, yeah, I was jealous.”

Cas leans toward his boyfriend and smirks as he turns them in an easy circle. “You want to dance with me, bello?”

“Bello?”

“Beautiful.”

“Cas.” Dean’s rosy face turns away from him, but Cas won’t have it. His lips trace Dean’s significantly scruffy jawline until he captures his lips. He draws him close and they share space and breath as they turn lazily, slippers scuffing the floor. “Yes, by the way. To dancing and to the date.” Cas smiles and hums his pleasure in Dean’s mouth until Allie shrieks in disgust at all the “yucky kissing” and calls for her father.

Cas insisted that Sam return his rental and use his new Ford Explorer to shuttle around, so the
The driveway is empty that afternoon save for the wheelchair-accessible van in the driveway. Cas is enjoying a bit of alone time as he readies the house for Bobby’s discharge tomorrow. He sings softly to himself as he switches the laundry and brings the dryer-warm sheets into Bobby’s bedroom, makes the bed, then trots upstairs to do the same on their bed. He falls onto his belly and sniffs the fresh linens. He always loved the feeling of fresh sheets as a kid. Not that he got them very often; sheets were always the last to be washed when money was tight. Now he can have fresh sheets whenever he likes. He smiles into them as he thinks not only about the pleasure of clean sheets, but of getting them dirty tonight with his favorite person after their date. He’s planning to take him to dinner, then a Learn to Dance night at a local studio. He was excited when he found the opportunity online. If they like it, maybe they can even make it a regular thing. He’s thinking about dinner options that won’t be too heavy when he hears something downstairs.

Cas creeps into the hall as quietly as he can, listening for movement. He can tell by the footfalls that it isn’t Dean or Sam. He hears muttering and barely keeps himself from bolting down the stairs and knocking the intruder out. The phone rings and Cas, of course, doesn’t answer. The alarm system, hidden behind a hollowed picture, will silently alert the police if they don’t answer the house phone. There’s cursing and things being moved around, though it sounds like nothing’s being purposely destroyed. Still, it’s an incredible invasion not only physically, but emotionally.

The intruder doesn’t seem satisfied after a thorough look-around downstairs, because Cas hears footsteps coming his way. He considers his options: back into the hall, back into one of the rooms, meet the intruder on the stairs. There’s no option, really—he’s not going to get trapped. Besides, he can hold his own if he has to. Before he has the chance, though, the door slams open and he hears simultaneous shouts of “Cas!” and “Police!”

Cas runs downstairs to see Dean screaming and struggling against an officer while another is taking John Winchester down. He beelines for Dean, who stops his frantic yelling and jumps into Cas’ arms. “It’s okay, Dean,” he soothes with a hand rubbing his back.

“The alarm company called and said there was a problem and no one answered here and I knew you were here and I rushed home and saw him and I thought he hurt you—”

“Shh, shh, it’s okay, I’m okay.”

Dean clings to Cas long enough to calm a bit, then he yells, “And that piece of shit was stealing Aunt Karen’s coin collection!” Cas notices books and coins scattered on the floor. The collection must’ve been hidden in the bookcase and dropped when John was caught.

“Oh okay,” Cas strokes his face. “The police are here, it’s okay.”

“Motherfucker! Breaking in and stealing from your friend when he’s in the damn hospital! Stay out of our lives!” he yells toward John as he’s led out the door. He turns to Cas and collapses, shaking in his arms.

Date night becomes eating Chinese food straight from the boxes on the couch and retiring to their bedroom by 6:30. They watch Netflix in bed and do not chill in any sense of the word, Dean riled up and restless the entire night and Cas awake beside him.

Bobby comes home the next day and the chaos, though not malicious like the John debacle, continues. Their usual routines are turned upside down by Dean’s extended hours at work, visitors, and the additional care that Bobby needs to recover from surgery. Typical CABG is difficult enough to recover from, but with Bobby’s condition it’s an even greater concern. Cas considers it a huge win (and a huge surprise) that he didn’t get pneumonia after having the breathing tube in place. That would’ve been disastrous. There’s still a significant concern for blood clots, though, particularly
since Bobby cannot move most of his body on his own. Cas adds extra movement into his day to address this. There’s also the challenge of helping Bobby change out his wet clothes and undergarments. Between the surgery and the cracked ribs, he cannot roll him onto his left side. He figures it out with the creative use of wedge pillows, but it’s extremely taxing for Bobby, who already feels like shit both physically and emotionally, and it’s not so easy on Cas, either.

They’re in survival mode for the next three weeks.

Near the end of Bobby’s third week home, Cas is exhausted. “I know there’s a light at the end of the tunnel, but I’m not sure whether it’s a train barreling down on my ass or not,” he says to Charlie on a Thursday afternoon while Bobby is napping in his chair. He sips the coffee she brought him after she left the bakery.

“Been rough, huh?”

“Yeah, a little bit. I’m just really tired.”


Cas shrugs. “That’s where we’re at right now.”

“You need a vacation. You haven’t taken one since you started here, and you used to take a couple a year.”

“Yeah, I know, but what can I do? When I started, they had no one. When I finally felt like maybe we could get away with it, we planned a weekend and it went sideways. I’m not going to leave Dean alone to manage this while I go off wherever.”

“I know, sweetie, but even if it’s your job, it’s hard to be a caregiver. You taught me that. You have to take care of yourself. Maybe Dean could help?”

“He helps with what he can, but the physical part of it has been demanding and much more suited to professional nursing care. Besides, he’s been working himself silly trying to catch up at work, and he has his father on his mind, and his brother, and Bobby of course. Maybe he could do the dishes, though.” He glances at the mess in the kitchen and grimaces.

“I don’t mean help that way. I mean help you take care of yourself.”

“Oh.” He shrugs. “I don’t really know what he could do.”

“Hmm.” She twits her mouth thoughtfully. “Well, besides the obvious blow job—”

“Ha. Right. We haven’t had sex since Bobby got home. No energy or time for it.”

“Oh.” She frowns. “Well, I’ll give it some thought. What’s going on with his dad?”

“He had several warrants out in Kansas for a bunch of shit, so he’s out there now. I don’t think we’ll be seeing him again. Not for a long time, anyway.”

“Hallelujah for small favors. What’s up with Sam?”

“Fighting with the ex.”

“Ugh. The worst part of marriage is divorce.”

“Says the married woman.”
“Happily married. Wanna play some games?”

He glances at the game system he bought for Dean last Christmas. He can hardly believe the holidays are almost upon them again. “Yeah. I miss Sunday Funday.”

Charlie sits on his lap and curls around him. “Me too, hubby. We need to get back to it.”

After an hour of games, Cas feels better. “Thanks, Charles in Charge,” he smiles against her temple, calling her a nickname he used when he worked for her mother.

“Anytime, hubby.” She leaves a wet smack to his cheek.

“Girl cooties, gross.” He exaggeratedly wipes off her kiss, and she tickles him until they’re interrupted by Bobby waking and laughing at them.

Dean gets home late that night, as he has been, but he pulls Cas to the couch and gives him a shoulder rub while the three of them watch football. In the morning, Cas wakes up to breakfast and a clean kitchen. That night, Dean is home by 4:30 and sweeps Cas into his arms.

“Charlie got to you,” Cas observes wryly.

“She wasn’t wrong,” Dean says with a shrug. “I’m taking you out tonight.”

“That’s sweet, Dean, but—”

“I already planned everything and you don’t have to dress up or anything. In fact, wear something super comfortable. Take a shower and meet me in the living room in half an hour.”

“Are you taking me to yoga?”

“No, but you look like you’d bend over for me really well.”

“And willingly,” he purrs back. Dean nuzzles his nose and teases his lips until Bobby clears his throat and tells them to keep it in their pants in public areas.

“Dinner and dancing,” Dean announces once they’re in the car.

“Oh, well, I’m certainly ready for that.” He looks pointedly at his track pants and long-sleeved t-shirt, then at Dean.

“You are.” He pulls into Charlie and Jo’s driveway, which is empty. “Close your eyes.” He trusts Dean to lead him the familiar way up the ramp and into the house. “Ta da!”

He opens his eyes to a single red rose in a bud vase, Trudy’s nice china and flatware, a bottle of wine chilling in a cloth-covered bucket, and a tantalizing smell from the slow cooker. “Oh, Dean,” he whispers, overwhelmed at the gesture.

Dean wraps his arms around him from behind. “Ti amo, sweetheart,” he murmurs in Cas’ ear. “I know we’ve had a lot going on lately, but ti amo tanto. Ti amo sempre.”

“Do you even know what that means?” Cas turns and asks with a little smile.

“I had to ask Giulia about tanto and sempre,” he sheepishly admits. Cas laughs brightly. This man
makes him so happy, and he *amos* the hell out of him. He drags Dean into a kiss that quickly turns deep and lusty. Everything in him yearns for more, but Dean doesn’t let it get too far. “Later. I have plans.” Dean laughs at his pout and pinches his lip.

Dean slices thick pieces of crusty bread and pours them each a glass of wine. When he drops the bottle back into its holder, Cas catches a flash of bright orange and peeks under the cloth. “Nice wine bucket,” he grins, revealing the gaudy Halloween pumpkin candy bucket.

“I couldn’t find anything else!”

Cas thinks it’s perfect and they have a good laugh.

Dinner is pot roast, and the meat is perfectly tender. Dessert is lava cake Cas recognizes from the bakery, but topped with a strawberry compote that Cas has made many times at home. After dinner, Dean wanders to Charlie’s wireless speakers and turns them on, connects his phone, and takes Cas’ hand. “Dance with me?”

“Look at you being all romantic,” Cas grins.

“Learned it from you. You’re the one who told me he was gonna take me to dinner and dancing before my asshat father ruined everything.”

“I’m not romantic.” They start swaying in place to the music.

“You also inspired the red rose.” Dean strokes his face. “You believe in love and happy endings.”

“I do not.”

“Sure you do. Otherwise you wouldn’t have taken a chance on me.” He trails kisses up Cas’ neck.

“I only took a chance on you because you were being a pain in my ass.” Dean hums and nibbles at Cas’ lobe. “And because you’re exceptionally attractive.” He kitten-licks the shell of his ear. “And because...mmmm...what was I saying?”

“Something very important, I’m sure,” Dean chuckles as he pecks and drags his lips all around Cas’ face and neck, torturously slowly. They move as one through song after song until Castiel feels the coil of tension in his body unwind. “Come on,” his boyfriend whispers eventually, not bothering to turn off the music as he leads him by the hand to Cas’ old bedroom. “Wait here a sec.” When he returns, he’s wearing a black set of Cas’ scrubs. He wiggles his brows and grins cheekily as he pulls Cas, still standing, to the bed. “Nurse Dean is gonna take care of you,” he murmurs with a gentle kiss on his lips.

Dean presses him down onto the mattress and hovers above him, taking him in. The adoration in his eyes makes Cas self-conscious and bashful. Dean smiles wickedly yet fondly as he strips Cas to his boxers. He plants several kisses to the bottom of his chin—it’s their little inside joke after the whole glabella/gnathion thing, and Cas secretly loves it—before working his way down and all around his body. He moans and sighs in pleasure for a while until he realizes he’s done nothing for Dean. Opening his eyes, he peeks at the outline of Dean’s cock in his pants and reaches for it, but Dean avoids his touch. “Dean,” he pouts.

“Nuh uh. This is just for you.” He continues his ministrations, but Cas just can’t stop himself from reaching out for him again. Dean grunts and stops. “Hey now. Lie back and listen to Nurse Dean. You’ve been doing way too much for everyone else. Time to let someone take care of you.”

Cas huffs. Letting someone else take care of him is something he tried before...and look where that
got him. “Dean…”

“Nope. Listen. I know this shit’s hard for you, but you gotta trust me. Do you trust me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Alright, then. This is for you. Now relax.”

Dean starts again, but Cas struggles to hold still. He wants to, badly, but the drive to help others yet not allow the same for himself is old and deeply ingrained. Dean stops.

“Mr. Novak, you’re not listening to your nurse’s instructions.” He slithers over Cas’ body, taking Cas’ arms as he goes and pressing them above his head. “In order for the treatment to work, you have to keep your hands to yourself so that I can care for you. Now keep them there.”

“Okay.”

But he can’t stop himself from reaching for Dean just a minute later.

“Mr. Novak,” Dean growls as he pins Cas’ wrists in place once again, “if you move even one finger again, I’m going to have to restrain you. Do you want to be restrained?”

It’s a challenge and an invitation to trust him even more deeply than he’s already asked, not to mention an alluring, captivating idea, and Cas’ cock immediately jumps at the thought. No one’s ever suggested restraint before, probably because he tends to be dominant both in and out of the bedroom. Plus, he’s always been driven to please his partner—to please everyone, really—above all else. No one’s been driven to make him focus only on himself, like Dean is suggesting. Sure, a few partners have wanted to focus exclusively on his pleasure at times, and it was enjoyable, but Castiel had always thought of his acquiescence to this as pleasing his partner. He helped them by letting them focus on him because they got off on the power of making him come. He supposes maybe this is Dean’s goal as well, but he knows Dean and it doesn’t feel that way. It feels like he wants Cas to get off for the whole purpose of Cas getting off.

Dean’s staring at him intensely, waiting for an answer. Can you truly trust him to take care of you like you never have before? Can you let yourself be vulnerable in every way? Anticipation and excitement shiver through him as Cas raises the middle finger of his right hand, never taking his eyes off Dean’s. Challenge accepted.

Dean’s gaze shifts to Cas’ hand, then back to his eyes. He licks his lips. “I’ll be right back,” he says, pressing a kiss to his chin. He stands and walks out of the room, returning a few minutes later with a purple scarf that is usually draped on top of one of the lamps in the living room, two yellow strings that look like they’re from one of Charlie’s work aprons, and one long black string that’s clearly the drawstring of the scrubs he was wearing, which are missing now. He sits on the bed, resting his hand on Cas’ heart and eyeing him nervously. “Do you consent to this, Cas? Me taking care of you? I should’ve asked first before I started, but I didn’t and that wasn’t right. So. Do you consent to me taking care of you?”

Cas thinks about how far Dean has come. At one time his anxiety about being a good caregiver and making sure his family’s needs were met would have compelled him to act without giving a choice. It wasn’t malicious. It was never malicious. It always came from a place of deep care. But he has grown, and he recognizes that in order for those he cares for to truly have what they need, they must first come to a place of accepting the care that is being offered. “Yes, Dean,” he says. He watches relief flood his features.
“And to being tied? We don’t have to, the idea just popped into my head out of nowhere and—”

“Yes, Dean.”

“Cas,” Dean breathes reverently as he strokes his face. “Tell me if you want to stop, okay?” He silently, carefully ties Cas’ feet to the footboard with the yellow strings, then binds his wrists with the scarf and winds the black drawstring around the scarf and onto the headboard. “Ti amo. I love you,” he says before pressing a sweet kiss to Cas’ lips that makes him whimper.

Cas tries the strings, but the ties are surprisingly strong. Dean massages his body with flavored oil, causing him to cry out both when Dean works out the knots in his muscles and when he swirls his tongue in patterns over his skin. He nips and sucks in every area that makes Cas wild. He holds Cas’ hips down when he seeks friction, murmuring “I got you, trust me to take care of you.” He won’t let Cas touch him, no matter how hard he wiggles his body to try. He’s not even touching himself, even though Cas can see he’s rock hard. All of it drives Cas to distraction until he eventually surrenders to Dean’s worshipful care and lets go.

He never thought surrender would feel so freeing. In the other times he surrendered in his life, with other people, he was always giving something up. This time, he feels as if he’s being showered in riches—pleasure, joy, freedom, security, trust. To let go—knowing you can rest, knowing you can rely on someone else, someone who’s competent and caring and devoted to you—is orgasmic. He comes with Dean’s hands surrounding his penis and a loud, long cry, rattling the headboard and footboard as his limbs flail in ecstasy against the restraints until his body finally relaxes.

Dean unties his hands and feet and massages them before he stands. “Don’t move,” he whispers as he leaves. Castiel doesn’t think he could move if he tried. Dean returns with a warm, wet cloth and washes him clean, then covers them up and curls behind him, gathering him in his arms. His penis, still hard, presses against the cleft of Cas’ ass. Cas begins moving against it but Dean stills his hips. “Nope. It’ll calm down. You have the night off from taking care of other people.”

“Dean—”

“Not tonight. Tomorrow we can take care of each other.”

“Can we take care of each other every day?”

_Shit._ He did _not_ mean to say that, and certainly not in that warm, dreamy way. But Dean breathes a long, delighted sigh. “Yeah, Cas. We can take care of each other every day.”

Castiel never would have trusted those words from anyone else, but he trusts them from Dean.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, we needed some sweetness, hmm?

Warnings for:
- Home invasion
- Consensual restraint

Next chapter: Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes.
Cas is a wild man the morning after their date, and Dean loves it. Seeing Cas so relaxed and light makes him realize just how weighed down his boyfriend has been, and he vows to change that. He vows to thank Charlie for helping him get his head out of his ass, too.

Or maybe he’ll wait on that thank you note.

“What is this?” Dean asks. He’s holding a handwritten sign he pulled from the bedroom door that reads *Cas and Dean’s Sex Dungeon. Enter only if you like dicks.*

“Are they talking about our sex organs or us in general, do you suppose?” Cas asks, sidling up to him. Dean rolls his eyes while Cas laughs at his own joke.

“Make your own assumptions!” Jo calls from the kitchen.

They wander toward the smell of coffee. “Not sure I wanna know what you did with the scarf from the living room and the strings from Charlie’s apron,” Jo says. Charlie isn’t around. Dean assumes she’s at work, since Jo’s up early on a Saturday.

“Something you might want to try,” Cas smirks with wiggling brows. Dean laughs aloud, but smothers the tiny, relieved smile that comes after under his hand. He hoped he hadn’t gone too far with everything last night. By Cas’ demeanor and enthusiastic lovemaking this morning, he supposes he didn’t.

“Now I *know* I don’t wanna know.”

“Your wrists are smaller than mine, though, so maybe wrap the scarf around twice…”

“Ugh, now I have a visual! Get it out! Get it out!” Jo smacks her head with her hand.

“You don’t mind if we leave the ball gag here, do you?”

“Stop it!”

“Hey, if you find a little silicone thing about the size of my thumb, lemme know, we couldn’t find it…”

“Stop!” Jo swats at Cas repeatedly as he sinks to the floor to deflect her blows.

“Okay, stop, I beg you!” Cas cries. She backs off and he looks up and grins, “Yeah, I said that to Dean last night, too, but I didn’t say my safeword, so…”

Dean is nearly spun around as Jo takes off after Cas, who wisely runs. “The safeword is salami!” Dean hears Cas scream. He wonders if they’re the last words he’ll ever hear his lover say.
Cas survives and Dean drops him off at home to relieve Meg, who’s been there all night. He heads into work and thinks about him the rest of the morning. His employees accuse him of having his head in the clouds, but he doesn’t care. He’s been so absorbed in everything else that he thinks he deserves some time to daydream about Cas. He needs to figure out how to keep showing him how much he loves him. It’ll be too easy to slide backwards with everything going on in their lives. This was highlighted for him in no uncertain terms by Charlie, who gave him a lot of food for thought when she marched into the garage before he left on Thursday.

“You’re gonna lose him if you don’t step it up,” she said to him. “He’s as emotionally and physically drained as you are, and he’s pretty much doing this all alone right now. You remember what that was like, don’t you?”

He did remember, and he felt like shit for putting Cas in that position. But Charlie wasn’t done.

“He loves you, so he won’t tell you this, but I will. He needs to be taken care of sometimes—not because he’s incapable, but because he’s too capable. Get me? He’s had very few people in his life truly take care of him, you know? He needs you to do that.”

Yes. Dean knew what that was like, too, and Cas had been that person for him.

“And I don’t want to scare you, but this really hot guy’s been in the bakery asking for him. Like I said, I know he loves you, but if he doesn’t feel appreciated…” She trailed off and shrugged. He knew what she wasn’t saying, and it tore him apart to even think about.

Dean and Charlie came up with the plan for their date. Luckily, Meg was game to help, and it all went off perfectly. He knows, though, that one night together won’t carry them forever. He has to make some changes—long-lasting changes that let them be a couple even when their lives are crazy.

It starts today.

Dean looks at the books and does some calculations, then calls Garth and Benny into his office. After speaking with them, he picks up sandwiches and sodas, then closes up the shop early and calls the guys in for a meeting.

“Alright, guys. First of all, I wanna thank you for all the hard work you guys put in every day, and for your support of me and Bobby and Cas, too. I appreciate all of you.”

“We appreciate you, boss,” Zeke calls out. The guys cheer and salute him with their sodas.

“Thanks, guys. Um, so there’s gonna be a few changes around here. Bobby’s health and my relationship with Cas have reminded me that I hafta have a life outside of here, and I’ve been trying to do too much. So, starting next weekend, I’m done working weekends for good. I know I had stopped before Bobby’s stuff happened, but I’ve been here every weekend since and I don’t need to be anymore. Also, we’re growing, and that’s awesome, but because of that and because I don’t wanna live here 24/7 I have some staffing changes to announce. Starting on Monday, Garth is gonna be your new manager for the repair side and Benny’s the new manager for the restoration side. They’re gonna be entrusted with more of the day-to-day stuff, problem solving, that sort of thing. You’ll go to them first. I’m gonna be here, obviously, but I’m gonna take more of a oversight and administrative role rather than getting my hands dirty. I’ll do an occasional custom restoration if I can, but overall, I’m gonna hang back and let you guys do what you do best. Questions?”

There are none, and everyone seems positive about the changes. Dean smiles as he watches his employees both congratulate and razz their new managers. “Bobby’s real impressed with what you’ve been doin’ here, and I can see why,” Rufus tells him quietly. “I’m glad you’re gonna do
somethin’ for yourself. We all wanna see you happy.”

“Thanks, Rufus,” Dean smiles, drawing the man into a reluctant hug.

*Feelin’ better already,* he realizes as he’s leaving.

That night, after insisting that Cas go to bed because he’s falling asleep on the couch, he helps Bobby with his bedtime routine and takes the opportunity to speak with him. “So listen, um, I’ve been thinking about Cas,” he starts as he lifts him out of his chair with the Hoyer and onto his bed.

“When don’t you?” the older man snarks.

“Ha ha. Not too often I don’t, actually,” he admits. “Anyway, um, I was wondering if maybe he could use regular days off, you know? Since he lives with us and all, he doesn’t really have a chance to get away from...um...”

“His job,” Bobby finishes. “You can say it. I ain’t gonna boo hoo about it.”

Dean slides the damp incontinence undergarment and padding out from under his uncle. “Yeah. So, um, how would you feel about having a couple of people able to help out regularly? Um, like, maybe a couple times a week?”

“You want me to have more people changin’ me and whatnot.”

As he readies himself to do just that for his uncle, Dean pauses. “Uhhhh...yeah.” He had felt so confident in this idea, but now he’s not so sure. Bobby has always had a hard time with letting people care for him. “Listen, you have the choice. If you don’t want to, Cas and I can keep splitting it up like we have been, and now that you’re getting better I’ll be able to do more again anyway. I’m not going to work weekends or late nights anymore, either, so that’ll help, and now that Garth and Benny are managers—”

“You made ‘em managers?”

“Yeah. They deserved it. Besides, I was burning the candle at both ends. Wasn’t fair to you, and it definitely wasn’t fair to Cas. Wasn’t so great for me, either. I’m trying to do more for myself, and I want Cas and I to last, you know? So. Anyway, yeah, I made them managers. But back to the home care. Like I said, if you don’t want—”

“Yes, I’ll do it for you and Cas. I’ll even behave myself and let ‘em do their work,” he grumbles.

Dean releases a breath as he finishes with Bobby’s pajamas. “You sure?”

Bobby squints at him for a moment. “You kids bein’ happy means more to me than a little embarrassment. I, uh...I love you two.”

For the sake of both of them, Dean blinks back the tears that have sprung into his eyes. “We love you, too,” he says as he gives him a hug. Bobby grunts and swears about Dean turning the exchange into a “moment.”

“I wanna interview them, though,” Bobby adds as a caveat. “And I wanna sic Cas on ‘em, make sure he ruffles ‘em up good so we know they’re worth their salt.”

“Agreed,” Dean says with a laugh.

Sunday Funday is easy to get back online; all he had to do was call Charlie and Jo in the morning
The trickiest part of his plan is Sam. They’ve been talking a lot more regularly since last Christmas and every day since Bobby’s heart attack, but he truly has no idea what Sam will say to Dean’s proposal. It takes him a few days to psych himself up for the call, but on Wednesday night he shoos Cas out of the house to go bowling with Gabe and Zar and dials his brother.

After a few minutes chatting with Allie and a combined total of two minutes of Allie and Sam talking to Bobby (Bobby’s never liked talking on the phone), then another few minutes of talking about Sam’s day, Dean shuts himself in his room, takes a deep breath, and plunges in.

“Uh, so listen, I’m trying to make some changes in my life and I, uh, well, I’m hoping you might be able to help.”

A pause. “Okay.”

“Um, well, I’ve been taking care of Bobby for a long time now—and that’s fine, I don’t mind—but I really want to be able to take some time with just me and Cas sometimes. For our relationship, you know? He’s...well, I love him and I don’t want to lose him, and we gotta be able to focus on us sometimes. I, uh, well, so me and Cas haven’t been able to take time off or a vacation or anything ‘cause of, you know, everything. Um, so, I guess what I’m asking is if there’s any way at all you can come for a couple of weeks a year and stay with Bobby so that Cas and I can take time away.”

Silence.

“Uh, I mean, even if it’s just one week, that would be cool.”

More silence, and Dean is growing more uncomfortable by the minute. Why did he ever think he could ask his family for something for himself? Still, for Cas, he soldiers on with, “I mean, if money is a problem we can pay for your airfare and—”

“Dean, you’ve never asked me for anything in your life. I—I’d love to help you.”

Dean releases a shaky breath. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ve always wanted to help, Dean, but...but you and Bobby have always pushed me away. I assumed after a while that you guys didn’t want my help or didn’t want me around or whatever.”

“Dude, that’s not true. Well, the help may be, because you know how we are. But not wanting you around...I love having you around, and he does, too. We pushed you away because we wanted you to do something with your life and not be stuck here. You had dreams and goals and shit, and we knew staying here was just gonna drag you down, especially with Dad’s shit. Then you met Amelia and her family and...I mean, I’ve never met ‘em except at the wedding, but I figured they’ve gotta be better than us, you know? And then you had a kid and stuff, so. We didn’t wanna pull you from all that.”

“They’re not better than you,” Sam sighs. “And I get where you’re coming from, but it didn’t feel that way to me. It just felt like I was...I don’t know. Like you guys just wanted to be on your own, I guess, or something. It hurt.”
Hearing the impact his and his uncle’s stubbornness and self-sacrifice had on Sam is painful, but it’s a relief, too. Sam wasn’t staying away because he didn’t want to be near them; he was staying away because they were too good at pushing him away, and he didn’t know how to push back. “I’m sorry, Sam. We got caught up in trying to protect you and give you a chance at a good life. Never considered you’d think a life with us was a good thing.”

“You’re my family, Dean.”

Tears burn under his lids; he rubs harshly at his eyes and sniffs. He hears Sam sniffling, too. “Hell yeah we are, Sammy.”

The brothers sit in a thoughtful silence until Sam breaks it with, “So, actually, I’m glad you’re bringing this up.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ve, uh, been thinking and talking with Allie and Cas and...I think I’m gonna move back.”

Dean is flabbergasted. “You—here?”

“Yeah. My company has a branch just outside of Philly and they said there’d be an opening for a Director of IT at the start of the new year. They said I could have it if I wanted it. Cas said there are some nice places in the area and he checked out schools for Allie and stuff.” Quietly, he adds, “He said you’d love to have me home. I wanna come home, Dean.”

Fat, happy tears spill from Dean’s eyes. “Come home, Sammy. Come home.”

When Cas arrives home later that night, Dean pounces on him. “You fucking secretive bastard,” he smiles before pressing him into the entry door and kissing him hard. Cas, surprised as he is, recovers quickly and soon has their positions reversed. Dean gasps as his boyfriend inhales his tongue and cups his ass firmly in both hands.

“You spoke to Sam,” Cas guesses when they break.

“Yeah. He’s putting in the transfer papers tomorrow. Was it your idea?”

“I might have mentioned it…” he says. “But Sam was already thinking about it, anyway.”

“Ti amo so fucking much, Cas,” he says before yanking him by the collar into another scorching kiss that turns into a very satisfying tryst on the couch.

On Saturday Dean arranges for Meg and Charlie to hang out with Bobby so he can take Cas out. He buys a new shirt and a bottle of cologne at Macy’s, then stops at Hair by Kenneth to get a cut. “Hey, Ken,” he greets his stylist. He’s seen the man a few times now, but not in a while because of Bobby’s illness.

“Hey there, Dean. Long time no see.” He ushers Dean to the sink.

“Yeah, I know. Had a lot going on.” As Ken washes his hair, he explains Bobby’s heart attack, Cas’ heroics, and the road to recovery.

“Wow. So I guess you’re celebrating tonight?” he asks as he moves Dean to the cutting chair.

“Well, kind of, but not exactly. Just trying to get back on track with Cas, actually. It’s been rough. We haven’t had a lot of time together, both stressed out, you know? But things are gonna get better
from here. I’ve got a plan. I’m doing a bunch of stuff to make our lives simpler so we can focus on us. We haven’t really had that chance. It’s been sorta hard to be a couple when we have all kinds of shit going on.”

“Mmm. Sounds complicated.”

“Yeah, but we’ll make it. We love each other.”

Ken pauses in his clipping. “You sure about that?”

Dean frowns at the stylist in the mirror. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not saying you won’t or you don’t. I’m just saying I’ve had too many people sit in this chair and tell me the same thing, and then they fall apart when times get tough. Or the tough times kept them together and when things got better, they didn’t know what to do.” He lays a hand on Dean’s shoulder and smiles at him sympathetically in the mirror. “Relationships are tough to maintain when you have so much going on. Just like you said.”

“Yeah, but we’re different,” Dean says, though he doesn’t feel as certain now.

“I believe you. I’m just saying I’ve seen this a lot. How long have you been dating?”

“Since the summer.” Ken nods slowly, and Dean realizes it sounds ridiculous to a stranger’s ears that they’ve only been dating three months yet their love will survive all of the crap they’ve been through. He feels compelled to add, “I know it sounds ridiculous, but we’ve known each other for a year now and we’re good.”

Ken nods and smiles as he whisks the cape off and dusts the hair from his neck. “You are all set with your fresh new ‘do. And hey, Dean, don’t worry about what I said, okay?”

But he does worry, because looking at it from an outsider’s perspective, he realizes he might be overestimating the power of their love or whatever. They haven’t been dating long. He can count on one hand the number of actual dates they’ve been on. Their lives have been a blur of working and caregiving. This is Dean’s first significant relationship in...well, ever, probably. What if they don’t have what it takes?

“What’s wrong, Dean?” Cas asks at a restaurant that seems so boring and below what Cas deserves now that he thinks about it. Gourmet burgers are still burgers. What were you thinking, Winchester?

“Nothing.”

“I have asked you which pies you want for Thanksgiving three times.”

Dean shakes his head. “Sorry.”

“Would you rather not be here? We can go home if—”

“No! I mean, no, of course I want to be. I want to be anywhere you are.”

“Okay, well, I’m here and you’re somewhere else.”

“Sorry.” He moves to grab a sip of water to refocus himself and knocks it over, spilling it onto himself. “Motherfucker,” he mutters as Cas stands to try to dry him. He shoves himself out of his seat and scurries to the bathroom. After awkwardly trying to dry his pants with the hand dryer, he returns to the table to find their meals packaged and paid for. Great.
Cas fished his keys out of his jacket while he was in the bathroom and insisted on driving, so Dean finds himself the passenger in his own car as Cas brings them to a secluded spot of hiking trails and not much else and parks in a small, dark, rutted dirt lot. “Now,” Cas says, sliding over and straddling his lap, “What’s wrong?”

Dean can’t look him in the eyes. “What if we don’t make it?” he whispers. “I made this plan, Cas. Bobby’s gonna get more help so you can have a couple of days off, and we started up Sunday Funday again, and I’m delegating stuff at work so I don’t have to work weekends anymore, and Sam’s moving here so we can have time away. But what if it’s not enough? What if life keeps handing us shit? What if things never calm down, what if we can never take a vacation, what if I’m a terrible boyfriend and you decide I’m not worth the effort, what if—”

“Caro,” Cas coos, and just the warm rumble of his voice uttering the simple endearment severs Dean’s grip on his emotions. He closes his eyes and buries his face in Cas’ chest as Cas combs through his hair with thick, warm fingers. “Ti amo, cuore mio. Just making this plan, thinking about us like that, it’s enough. You’re enough for me. Don’t worry.”

“I can’t help it. I’m so scared. You don’t even know.”

“I do know, trust me. But look at me.” Cas nudges Dean’s face up until they’re eye-to-eye. “Life is going to keep handing us shit. But you and me, we’re stubborn sons of bitches. And we have a plan, a really good one that my smart, incredibly sexy and thoughtful boyfriend made.”

“Yeah, well, let’s see if I can even make it happen. Plans have a way of blowing up in my face. I couldn’t even finish our date. I still look like I pissed myself.” He glances at his wet pants and pouts. “You don’t look like you pissed yourself.” Cas draws closer and takes Dean’s face in his hands. “I think it looks like you blew your load because of some really hot thing I did. Like this,” Cas purrs, biting at his ear. Dean squirms and grabs his hips. “Or this.” His hands wander under his shirt and flick his nipples. “Or this.” Cas takes his hand and pulls it into his pants. Dean explores with his fingers and feels something in his lover’s ass. He gives it a tug and wrenches a moan out of the gorgeous man on top of him; he echoes it, loud and debauched, hardly believing what Cas has done. “Yessss. Fuck me, Dean. Right here in your car.”

Greedily, Dean pushes into Cas’ dirty mouth, pausing only to strip him bare in the November chill. Cas is hungry for it, thrusting his cock against Dean’s belly until Dean urges him into the backseat, where he hastily removes his clothes. Cas is sprawled across the seat, legs open in invitation. Never one to turn down such an offer from his boyfriend, he dives into the space between his legs and sucks down his cock while stimulating him with the plug. Bringing him to the edge is easy and quick, but he decides he wants everything to last a little longer. He backs off and urges Cas to his knees, kissing him deeply and mimicking Cas’ sprawled position of a moment ago. Cas eagerly dives in with tongue and wetted fingers, and soon Dean is the one teetering on the edge. He thrusts and keens as Cas finds his prostate over and over, then whines when he loses the contact.

“No,” Cas says with a slap to his bare ass. “I have not been wearing this plug for nothing. I want you to fuck me so hard you poke my brain, got it?” He turns and braces himself against the door, presenting his ass.

“I don’t think that’s anatomically possible.”

Cas glances over his shoulder. “Dean. I think my use of hyperbolic was obvious there. Are you going to fuck me or not?”

“ Fucking yes, sir,” Dean growls. He stimulates his lover with the plug again until Cas leaves finger
streaks in the steam built up on the windows, then pulls it out and glides into him with one long, steady push. The two men moan as one, pleasure singing from their bodies into the air. At Cas’ insistence, Dean drives into him in a pounding rhythm. He holds Cas’ shoulder as he thrusts harder; he sees Cas’ arm moving frantically up and down and pictures his hard, thick cock bursting through his fist over and over. That and Cas’ face pressed against the fogged glass throw Dean over the edge; he grips his hips hard as he drives in one final time, spilling into his lover. Cas wails, high-pitched, as come shoots onto the door of his Baby, forever staining it with the sweetest memory.

They separate with groans and complaints of stiff limbs. “Car sex is not for tall, middle-aged men,” Cas comments as he rolls over to sit on his ass. Dean can’t be bothered to care about the seats. “Not that I’m complaining. Not about the sex, anyway.”

Dean snickers and cuddles into his side. “Mmm. So you were wearin’ this for awhile, huh?” he asks, twirling the plug in his fingers.

“Couple of hours. Fuck, you smell good. New cologne?”

“Mmmhmmm. Did you like it? The plug, I mean. When you joked about it with Jo I thought it was just that. Didn’t know you actually had one.”

“Didn’t. I bought one so I could be ready for those times we don’t have a lot of time, you know? So we could make time to be close even if we only have a few minutes together.”

Dean smiles, thinking about how being intimate in every way sounds like just as much a priority for Cas as it is for Dean. “I don’t know how the hell you managed to make wearing butt plugs sound schmaltzy. God, you really are a romantic.”

“I am not,” he giggles as Dean snuffles his ear.

“I won’t tell, I promise.” He glides a finger up Cas’ body until he reaches his face, where he turns it toward him. “And I promise you something else: I’m gonna do my damndest to take care of you, okay? I never want you to feel overwhelmed. I know our life is kind of complicated, but you are the best thing to ever happen to me and I wanna be here for you because ti amo. Okay?”

“I know, Dean.” Cas pecks him on the lips. “Ti amo, caro mio. I’m not going anywhere, no matter how complicated our lives get. Okay?”

“Okay,” Dean whispers, clutching to him and praying those words will never be tested again.

Chapter End Notes

Caregiving is hard, but Cas’ words are keeping me strong this week. (Because I’m a stubborn son of a bitch.) ♥

Next chapter: Testing, testing...
“The Poconos!”

“The Poconos? What decade are we in?”

“Rome! You guys are always speaking Italian to each other!”

“Rome is loud and touristy. You want quiet romance. Go to Puglia. It’s right by the sea and they produce such lovely olives, mmm.”

“Olives taste like sborra,” Cas announced with a shit-eating grin. Giulia cackled and swatted him but nodded in agreement. Sofia squinted at him and shook her head. “What? They do!” Everyone else stared at him and drew their own conclusions of what sborra meant.

Dean remembers the conversation they had with friends at Sofia’s fondly. It was just after Thanksgiving, and everyone was giving them ideas about where they should go for their hard-earned vacation. They decided not to do anything extravagant, just a few days between Christmas and New Year’s at a tiny cottage barely big enough for the two of them in the middle of nowhere. It had been so much fun to plan—Cas was far more romantic (and kinky) than Dean had given him credit for—and the first night was incredible. Being away from it all, alone with Cas, was more than he could’ve dared to dream.

So of course the dream shattered.

He only remembers snippets of their second morning—making love before breakfast, snowshoeing, Dean, I’m here, you’re okay, we’re at the hospital. Most of it is blank.

The doctor in the Emergency Department said he had a seizure and they didn’t know why, despite all the tests they made him do. Cas, ever the caregiver, got in their faces about it, but all Dean could think about is how much God must hate him to finally give him a taste of something good only to give him—and Cas—yet another hardship. He told Cas to just leave the doctors the hell alone.

They’ve been fighting ever since.

Dean refused to stay at the cabin when they left the hospital, so they packed up and went home. Dean was supposed to follow up with his primary care doctor but he didn’t have one, so Cas pulled some strings and got him in to see one. He refused to go. Dean has avoided Cas’ requests for dates, for getting together with friends, for doing anything, really. Cas keeps trying, though, even when Dean hears him call him “infuriating” under his breath. Dean knows he’s being an asshole, but he can’t help it.

“What’s your problem, son?” Bobby finally asks on a snowy night in late January. Dean is folding laundry, his eyes watering stupidly when he folds the huge, thick sweatshirt that he stole from Cas because he loves the feeling of being wrapped up in Cas even when Cas isn’t with him. He drops it
in Cas’ pile of clothes instead of his own.

“I’m fine,” Dean mutters.

“Then why are you pushin’ away the best thing that ever happened to you?”

“I’m not,” Dean snaps, but he knows he is. He stands to walk away from the conversation.

“Don’t try to—”

“I don’t want to talk about it!”

“Well ain’t that too bad, princess! Get out of your damn turret and listen to me for a minute!” Dean, shocked at Bobby yelling at him, sits. “Now I’ll ask you again: what the hell’s your problem?”

Dean glances at Bobby but can’t keep up his gaze. What’s been on his mind will probably hit a little too close to home for his uncle, and he doesn’t want to put that on him. “Just don’t feel good,” he settles on. *Close enough.*

“You’re filled with more shit than a cow pasture,” Bobby grumbles. “Probably ain’t even that.”

“It is!”

“Fine, then. Go to the doctor.”

“I don’t need to—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Damn it, Dean, if you don’t feel good you should be goin’ to the doctor, but you won’t. You should be tellin’ Cas, at least, but you won’t. That poor man just wants to help you, and you’re pushin’ him away. How do you think that makes him feel?”

“I’m not talking about it!” he yells, standing again and striding to his room. He leans against the closed door and slides down it, his breathing stuttered and hot as he clenches his eyes and mouth shut and tries not to sob.

When he’s calm, he goes out to the living room and finishes laundry as if they never had the conversation, then he silently helps Bobby to bed, praying that he doesn’t have another seizure and leave him stranded in the Hoyer lift or worse. It’s the same prayer he repeats every time he has to help Bobby, every time he has to check something in one of the bays at work, every time he drives, every time he’s with Cas. He’s never prayed so much in his life, and this to a God he’s pretty sure is out to get him. He goes to bed shortly after, not waiting for Cas to get home from cards night that was supposed to be at their place and got moved to Sam’s because Dean was in a pissy mood. Dean hears Cas anyway and pretends to be asleep. He feels his presence in the room, then hears him shuffling around as he sheds his clothes. He feels Cas’ breath on his face. “Ti amo, Dean,” he whispers as he cards his fingers lightly through his hair, then places a feather-light kiss between his brows. When Dean hears the shower start a few minutes later, the sobs he’d held in earlier escape in torrents from his eyes. He makes sure they are dammed up again before Cas returns.

He successfully avoids any attempts from Cas or Bobby to talk for another week, and though he thought he’d feel pleased by this, he just feels like shit. Reverting to the familiar—detachment, disconnection, fending for himself—hasn’t brought the comfort or safety it once did. However, telling Cas exactly what’s happening inside him—how he’s constantly on edge, terrified of what he could become—seems huge and frightening and much too much for Cas to take on.

Dean tries to be sociable the day of their Super Bowl party (Bobby really wanted to have everyone
over and Dean wouldn’t ever deny him that), but finds he’s so wrapped up in himself that he can’t enjoy it. At halftime, Sam asks for his help with his car, so he goes outside with him and is shanghaied.

“What is going on with you?” Charlie asks from the backseat of Sam’s car.

“It’s been over a month. You need to talk about this,” Sam responds to Dean’s glare.

Hot anger rises from his belly at being confronted. “I don’t need to talk about shit. I’m fine.”

“Oh huh. Look, I know I haven’t been back that long, but I’m your brother and I know when something’s bugging you. What’s the matter?”

“Cas is worried sick about you, and so are we,” Charlie chimes in.

“I’m fine. I don’t need anyone worrying about me, especially not him. Can’t somebody just be in a funk?”

“Your funk smells funky. I don’t buy it, Deanie Beanie.”

Dean softens at the silly nickname. “It’s just…life, okay? Just life. I’m just stressed.”

“You did all kinds of stuff to make things less stressful, though. I don’t get it.”

“And you have tons of help, Dean. I’m here now, and you have all your friends, and Cas—”

“I don’t—I know, but I don’t need help.”

“But you do, clearly, because you’re stressed out.”

“Drop it, Sam. I’ve managed before, I’ll manage again.”

“Don’t shut us out,” Charlie pleads. “I don’t know how seizures work, but Cas said you could have another one if you get too stressed, and—”

“I won’t! I’m fine and I don’t want to talk about it!”

“Ooh, Dean Winchester, you are so maddening! For crying out loud! If you won’t let anyone else help, at least let Cas hel—”

“No! Not Cas!” Dean opens the door and scrambles out of the passenger seat as fast as his legs will move. He slams the door shut and walks down the street, away from his meddling sibling and friend but not, unfortunately, from his own mind.

It’s not until he reaches the end of the street that he realizes how similar this is to their first Thanksgiving together, when he and Cas had a fight and he stormed off the same way he is now. Cas had pushed him and pushed him to think about what was right for him, about what his needs were. He knows that all of their fighting recently has been about Cas trying to get him to meet his own needs once again. But what about Cas’ needs? Why doesn’t Cas focus on his own needs for once? Maybe he needs to do the same for Cas. Maybe he needs to push Cas to consider what his needs are. Maybe that’s the most loving thing he can do. Plus he’ll get him off his back.

He returns to the party, shivering from the cold. Everyone calls to him and urges him back to the game, so he sits and warms up with cuddles from Jo and Ellen and a blanket that Ellen throws over him. He notices that Sam and Charlie are quiet and avoiding his gaze. Then he notices that Cas isn’t in the room. “Where’s Cas?” he asks no one in particular.
“Upstairs,” Ellen answers with a soft, sad look that makes him very uncomfortable.

Cas doesn’t return to the party, or even come back downstairs after everyone leaves. When Dean finally goes upstairs after helping Bobby with his evening routine, he expects to find Cas in their bed and he’s prepared for it. But Cas isn’t there, and when he goes back out into the hall, he sees the guest room door is closed. Oh. Dean knocks softly and walks in when he gets no response. He tiptoes to Cas’ side and watches him sleep for a long time, taking in the sweep of his lashes, the dark stubble he hadn’t noticed growing in, the curve of his back and the swell of his buttocks accented by the light of the hall. He swallows down the anguish in his throat. “You need someone who can take care of you, Cas, not another burden,” he whispers. “God, I love you so much.” The short hairs on Cas’ chin tickle his lips when he kisses it softly. “I thought I could do better for you, be better for you, and now this.” He backs away as Cas huffs in his sleep. With one more kiss, this time thrown into the air, he stands up. Grabbing an extra throw from the dresser because it gets drafty in this room, he lays it over Cas before walking out and spending a horrible night alone in their bed.

“Thank you for the blanket,” Cas says when Dean walks into the kitchen the next morning, making him jump. It’s early and the kitchen is pitch-black save for the light of the coffeemaker he thought they just forgot to turn off. “You’re up early.”

“Could say the same to you.” Dean flips the switch for the light above the sink, then pours himself a cup of the dark stuff that Cas seems to favor. “What’re you doing up?”

“I, uh, figured I’d visit Charlie today;” he shrugs. It sounds like a hastily-created lie. “Seth is coming by to do the morning routine later.” Seth is one of their new workers. He’s the same guy who smoothed the way when Bobby was in the ICU. He comes when his schedule allows, usually on Mondays. Dean likes the burly, hilarious nurse a lot. Their other new worker, Mindy, is a Certified Nurse’s Aide who comes on Tuesdays and sometimes Fridays. She’s awesome, too. Bobby likes both of them and, true to his word, he “behaves,” which they both say is no fun. They fit into the household quite well.

“Okay.”

“Dean, I’d really like to talk. I’m worried about you.”

Shit. “I’m fine, Cas,” he lies.

“So why the silent treatment? What did I do wrong?”

The insinuation that Cas did anything wrong at all breaks his heart. “You didn’t do anything wrong, sweetheart,” he says, sitting at the table with his steaming cup. “I’m fine. Just got a lot on my mind. I’m worried about you, actually.”

“Me? Why?”

“Because we’ve made all these changes, and you still seem stressed out.”

“Because of you, Dean.”

*Just like you were afraid of.* “I’m fine. I think you’re using this shit as an excuse not to take care of yourself.”

Cas squints. “What? How is that even relevant?”

“It’s relevant because I made a shit-ton of changes to make sure you could relax and be well and shit, and you’re just going out of your mind trying to take care of something that doesn’t need taking care
of.”

“You don’t know that! You haven’t had any follow-up!”

“Listen, you know as well as I do that they didn’t find any reason for the seizure, so going for a follow-up isn’t gonna do anything but cost us money.”

“You have insurance, Dean, and I can—”

“Don’t even say it. I’m not taking your money.”

“Fine, whatever. But your health is more important than money or me having to do a little extra around here, and I—”

He wanted to keep the attention on Cas, but he finds that his boyfriend’s attention is once again on him, and he doesn’t like it. “I am fine, fine, FINE! Stop bringing it up! I’m not talking about this with you anymore! I’m trying to talk to you about you and you keep changing the subject!”

“I’m fine!”

“Well, good, we’re both fine then!”

“But we don’t know if you—”

“I’m fine, fucking drop it, Cas, goddamnit! And if I’m not fine, whatever, it’s not your problem!”

Dean yells, heedless of his uncle sleeping down the hall.

Cas watches him, wide-eyed, before a cool passivity takes over his face. He tucks his hands between his thighs and takes a deep breath. “Alright. Clearly you don’t want me involved in any health concerns you may or may not have. I will stop asking about them.” He picks up his mug and brings it to the sink. “I hope you have a good day.” He kisses the top of Dean’s head before he walks away. It doesn’t feel as good as it usually does.

Cas is true to his word and stops asking about whether he’s feeling okay, whether he’s had more seizures, whether he’s made an appointment yet. It’s what Dean wants, yet it doesn’t feel right. In fact, it feels even worse, because both Cas and Bobby are being little shits.

“What do you mean, you don’t want me doing the routine anymore?” Dean asks Bobby several days after his talk with Cas. When Seth and Mindy aren’t there, Bobby has been asking Cas to do his care, even if it’s not his turn, and Dean has finally called him on it.

“Don’t want you to. It ain’t difficult to understand.”

“Uh, yeah it is.”

“Listen, truth is, I don’t know if you’re gonna have another seizure. If you do, I don’t wanna be dropped or hangin’ out all bare-assed until somebody else shows up.”

It’s Dean’s fear, too, but now that he’s being called on it he gets defensive. “I’m fine. I haven’t had one since the cabin.”

“I believe you, but I ain’t takin’ chances with my health or safety. I don’t want you doin’ it, not until you’re medically cleared.”

This has Cas written all over it, but Cas denies influencing him. “He is my client, Dean. I simply discussed his choices with him. He made his decisions about his own care.”
“You think I’m weak.”

“I don’t think you’re weak. I think you’re very strong. I think you should be medically evaluated regarding a physical health problem you’ve exhibited, but that’s your choice.”

“So, what, I’m being punished for not going to the doctor?”

“Of course not. Like I said, that’s your choice. Bobby simply made his choice about his health care.”

“It’s a punishment.”

“It’s a consequence. All behavior has consequences.”

“I’m fine.”

“Dean, I work for Bobby. Bobby made a choice. If you have an issue with his choice, you need to speak to him.”

Folding his arms, he mutters, “Fine, you two wanna be assholes about it, whatever. Just means more work for you.”

“Yes, but that’s fine. It’s my problem, not yours.”

“Cas, it’s not just your problem!” Dean explodes. “I did all kinds of shit to make your life easier so you wouldn’t have to do this all the time!”

“You did, and thank you. Now life has thrown me another curve ball. But that’s fine, it’s my problem and I can handle it on my own.

“We’re supposed to be handling shit together, Cas!”

“Indeed,” Cas intones, holding his gaze on Dean until Dean can’t take it anymore and flees the room.

Cas is also a dick about driving. On a Thursday night, Dean finally relents to joining everyone again at one of the restaurants where the gang gets together to watch whatever game happens to be playing. Tonight, it’s a hockey game. Dean grabs the keys to the van and starts it up as Cas wheels Bobby onto the lift. “I’m going to drive, Dean,” Cas calls.

“What the fuck for?”

“Because you haven’t been medically cleared to drive. I don’t want to risk my life with you at the steering wheel until you’ve been medically cleared.”

“Oh, bullshit, Cas. You just wanna force me to do what you want me to do, and I’m not doing it.”

“And I’m not being your passenger. Bobby, what do you want to do?”

The damn traitor chooses to get out of the van, too, so Cas unlocks his chair from the lift and they go inside. Fucking assholes. Dean, feeling spiteful, drives off in the van and heads toward the restaurant, but guilt gets him and he turns around and goes home. He rests his head against the steering wheel. His head is pounding and his stomach is churning. He gulps the saliva pooling in his mouth. Fuck it, he thinks, slamming the wheel before going inside, where they’re watching the game.

“I am not a child!” he yells at Cas, not giving a shit that Bobby’s there.
“Of course you’re not,” Cas agrees calmly.

“And I can damn well make my own choices about what I’m capable of!”

“Of course you can.”

“Well, you’re making me feel like a little kid!”

“My decisions are mine. Your feelings are yours. And vice versa.”

Cas’ cool manner only infuriates Dean. “You’re being manipulative!”

“No, I’m doing what you wanted. I’m not pestering you about your health. I’m simply making decisions in response to your decisions.”

“You sit there all smug, Cas, knowing this shit you do drives me nuts. I’m doing what I gotta do.”

“And so am I.”

“But you don’t have to! I’m fine!”

“That’s your belief. Until I see evidence, I will continue to be unswayed by your argument that you’re ‘fine’ and I will be concerned and make decisions based on that concern.”

“You don’t have to be ‘concerned.’ Why do I have to be your problem?”

“I never said you’re my problem, Dean. I don’t know where that’s coming from.”

“It’s coming from me maybe having some shitty chronic illness thing that you’re gonna make your problem. I’m gonna end up your damn patient instead of your boyfriend!”

“Dean, I—”

“Goddamnit, Cas, I won’t be your mother!” He doesn’t know where that came from, but as soon as it’s out of his mouth he’s shocked by the pure truth of it. He’s afraid of becoming so sick that Cas has to take care of him all the time, just like his childhood. He knows it’s possible, because he’s done the research and because he lied to the doctor, knowing in fact that he’s had at least one other seizure, and maybe a few more he thought were just episodes of spacing out. “I won’t do that to you,” he rasps.

Cas grits his teeth. “You are doing it to me. And you’re doing a great impression of my father as well.” Dean doesn’t understand—he’s nothing like them, he’s been taking care of himself and hasn’t asked Cas for anything!—but he doesn’t have the chance to ask what he means because Cas doesn’t stay on the topic. Instead, he stands and paces, then exhales harshly and says, “You are complicating things, Dean. It’s not complicated.”

“It’s not complicated? Of course it’s complicated! It’s always been complicated and it’s always gonna be complicated!”

Reaching out his hands, Cas says, almost pleading, “The circumstances might be complicated, Dean, but the core of the issue is simple—”

“It’s not, Cas. Nothing is simple with me. Life’s never gonna be simple with me.” With that, Dean storms to their room, desperate to get away from the pull of the man whose arms he just wants to collapse into and never let go. But it’s not that simple.
In the morning, he’s barely able to acknowledge Bobby’s “That boy loves you, son. It’s that simple.” When he goes to work, he frets over a bunch of paperwork on his desk, reading the words over and over and never understanding the gobbledygook. Rufus tells him to get his head out of his ass, which is nothing new, but when even Garth suggests that he’s getting in his own (and everyone else’s) way, he throws the cursed papers on the floor and decides to get some coffee across the street and see if maybe he can clear his head. He knows Cas is there, too, helping Charlie out with the Valentine’s Day orders. Maybe seeing him will make everything seem simpler.

And in a way, it does. When he walks in, he sees Cas standing at the SAHMs’ table, laughing and making a lewd gesture. Telling a dirty joke, no doubt, or reacting to one. He stands out of sight, just to watch him. God, he’s the most amazing person he’s ever known, and he’s brought so much to Dean’s life. He hates shutting him out. He wonders if maybe he’s been catastrophizing this whole seizure thing. Maybe it won’t be as bad as he’s making it out to be. Together, maybe they can figure it out, like all the other shit in their lives.

Just as he’s about to approach, a man he recognizes steps through the entrance and into his line of vision, blocking his view of the person he loves. He’s surprised to see his stylist here, since his salon is across town, but maybe Dean’s talked about the bakery so much he wanted to check it out. He’s even more surprised when Ken calls out in a shaky, tender voice, “Happy birthday, Blue Eyes.”

“Benji?”

Benji? Birthday? What?

A moment later, Cas is holding his uncomplicated ex-boyfriend tight, and a moment after that, Dean slips away. Some things are just that simple.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun duuuuuun!

Many of you called that Kenneth trouble!

Our poor Dean.

BTW, so you don’t have to sully your search history, sborra=come (in the ejaculate sense, lol).

Next chapter: It’s simple.
“Benji,” Cas smiles as he pulls back from their familiar-yet-foreign embrace. He can hardly believe he’s saying his name again, that the man is standing in front of him. It’s been a long time, but he’s as handsome as ever, even with a few extra lines around his eyes.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Benji smiles back, stating the obvious.

“Wow. What the hell are you doing here?”

“I had to come see you for your birthday.”

Cas shakes his head and chuckles. It’s an old joke that apparently hasn’t died. He refused to tell Benji his birthday when he asked, so for the rest of their relationship he would greet him with happy birthday “because one day I’ll get it right, Blue Eyes.” Benjamin was enamored with the color of his eyes from day one of their relationship, and the affectionate moniker also stuck and, like the joke, was not forgotten, it seems. “It’s not my birthday,” he smiles.

“Still a closely-guarded secret, huh?”

“Yes, but rest assured, I’m eternally 29.” He bats his eyelashes in jest. “Seriously, what are you doing here?”

Benji shrugs. “I really did come to see you.”

“Oh,” Cas says, taken aback but not unpleasantly. “Well, have a seat. Coffee?”

At his agreement, Castiel steps away and asks the new staff person, Madison, to get two cups of coffee going while he ducks his head into the entrance of the kitchen. “Gonna take a little extra time out there,” he says to Charlie. “An old friend showed up. An ex, actually.”

Charlie’s brow arches. “An ex? Not that asshole.”

“No. A guy named Benjamin. You don’t know about him. Sensitive topic,” he says to Charlie’s disapproving frown that she doesn’t know everything about his life. He grabs the coffees from Maddie and returns to his ex, who’s still standing in the middle of the shop, watching him. The SAHMs are watching him too, with curious eyes, and he rolls his in response.

“Who’s the hottie?” Diana calls.

He guides Benji to their table. “This is Benjamin. Benjamin, my wives Diana, Brie, Lacey, and Taylor. Oh, and my wife and best friend, Charlie,” he says as Charlie arrives, not unexpectedly. “It’s a joke,” he adds at his ex’s baffled look. They all nod greetings to each other.

“You’re the guy who keeps coming in looking for Cas,” Charlie notes with a squint. “Someone told
you his schedule? I told them not to.”

“He’s not a stalker, Charlie,” Cas says, though he finds it strange that Benji has come by repeatedly. He wonders if something’s happened.

“Sorry,” Benji says to her sheepishly. “It’s just been a while and I really wanted to reconnect.”

“It’s not fair, you know, Cas,” single mom Brie says. “You have all these women and men dropping at your feet, and I can’t get one. Leave some for the rest of us, why don’t you?”

Grinning, he holds his arms out by his sides, as if on display. “I try, Brie, but this body is a magnet. It’s a curse.”

“Dean won’t be jealous, will he?” Lacey teases.

Castiel scoffs. “Why would he be? Alright, see you all later.” He turns and ushers Benjamin to a secluded table. “So, what’s going on?”

“Like I said, I wanted to reconnect.”

“Okaaaay. How did you find me? Not that I was hiding, but nothing of our lives together would’ve indicated that I’d be working part-time in a bakery.”

“Not with your baking skills,” he jokes, then continues nervously, “Heard you were here through a client. So, how’s life?”

Sipping his coffee, Cas debates how to answer that. On the one hand, things have been stressful the last few months, and certainly in the last several weeks. On the other hand, he has Dean and friends and work that he enjoys. “Messy but ultimately good,” he settles on. “And you?”

They talk easily despite the time apart. Their breakup hadn’t been dramatic and full of animosity, it had just been sad, so there’s no undercurrent of anger. Benji catches him up on his family and his work, and things sound as calm as they always were. Even with the ease of their conversation, though, there’s a little something off about Benji’s visit, and it irritates him like a pebble in a shoe. “Alright, Benji, what gives?”

“What?”

“We haven’t seen each other in a few years now, and all of a sudden you’re here. Help me understand why. And no ‘I just wanted to catch up’ bullshit. What’s going on?”

Benji fiddles with his cup. “You always could see right through me, huh?” he sighs with an affectionate smile. “Listen, I...I’ve never liked how things ended up between us. When I heard you were still around, and I heard you were doing well, I...I couldn’t get you out of my mind. More than usual, I mean.” He lays his hand on top of Cas’ and, though Cas doesn’t remove it, he sits back so he can better assess what the hell is happening. “You’re right. It has been a few years, and I figured maybe the things that got in the way before might be resolved now, you know?”

“No, I don’t know. Explain.”

“It just sounds like you’re more open these days, more willing to, I don’t know, let yourself feel more.”

“How would you know that?”
“Um…” Benji turns away and taps the fingers of the hand not holding Cas’ on the table. “My client. That was the impression I got from him.”


“Cas, the way he described you, it sounded like you’ve grown so much, like you’re really ready to be in a relationship.”

“I am. With him.”

“But Cas,” he pleads. He reaches out to grab Cas’s arms, but Cas keeps them firmly locked around him. “Cas, listen. You’ve matured, and I have, too. I let go of the man I love too easily last time, but I wouldn’t do that again. I’m ready for the work a relationship takes.”

Massaging his temples, Cas says, “Come on, Benj. Surely you’ve met someone better than me in the years we’ve been apart.”

Benji leans across the table, his brown eyes earnest. “Never. I’ve been with others, but no one I’ve loved like you. Love like you.”

“You’re in love with the idea of me,” Cas retorts, leaning on his elbows now. “You’ve always loved a project. You have this need to fix, to make sure everything is just right. It’s what makes you good at your job. But it’s not good for people. Not good for me, anyway.” He stops and realizes something he never had before. “We didn’t work because I couldn’t be myself with you, because I wasn’t good enough for you as I was. I had to be fixed, ‘saved.’ You were looking for someone to save, and I looked like a great candidate.” Cas chuckles ruefully. “But you’d never known the likes of me, Benj. You were a Beginner Savior, and I was Advanced Savior material. You were never going to save me. And more than that, I didn’t need to be saved. I saved myself, over and over and over again. What I needed was someone to understand. I needed someone who wanted the imperfect, ugly, complicated me, the one who might never be able to say the words he wanted to hear and wanted me anyway.”

“And I was wrong about that, okay? I don’t need to hear it.”

“You weren’t wrong for wanting to hear it. I just couldn’t give that to you.”

“But I don’t need to hear it as long as I feel it. Really. If you can’t say it, you can’t.”

“You’ll never be able to feel it from me, either. I’m sorry, but I have Dean now.”

Benji shakes his head. “We had two great years together, Blue Eyes. You’ve only been with him, what, a few months? And what’s it been? A complicated mess, the way he tells it. I can give you so much more. Life with me would be simple. It was always simple, wasn’t it?”

Cas stares at his ex-boyfriend, the man who he might’ve, perhaps, considered spending his life with if he’d decided sacrificing himself, never really being known, was better than being alone. “Not as simple as you think,” Cas replies, shaking his head. “And yes, life with Dean is messy sometimes. But we are beautifully messy together. He gives me so much more than you know.”

“But I—”

“Do you need to hear it, Benji? Because you keep trying to make it sound complicated when it’s really quite simple. Here it is: I’m in love with him. I love Dean. I want to be with him. I’m sorry you and I couldn’t be what you hoped for.”
A tear slides down Benjamin’s face. “You told me you couldn’t say those words, that you weren’t sure you could really fall in love with someone because you weren’t sure what it really was.”

Cas shrugs. “I was wrong.”

“So why can’t we try again?”

“Because it wouldn’t work out between us.”

“But now you know how to love!”

“And who do you think taught me that?”

“But I—”

“Do you know how my mother died, Benji? Dean does. Do you know anything about my biological father? Dean does. Do you know I need to be taken care of sometimes? Dean does. Do you make me crazy with rage and affection all at once? Do you do stupid things because you want the best for me? Do you push me to want the best for myself? No, but Dean does. He knows me as I am and wants me as I am, no fixing needed. Benji, it will never work out for us because I’m in love with Dean—however complicated our lives are.” He pauses as his ex cries openly. “What’s this really about?”

“I’m so lonely,” he sobs on hitched breaths. “I’m forty years old and I’m alone, Cas, and I’ve always regretted losing you. My life has never been the same. Never. You were the one that got away, you know? When Dean came in and I figured out he was with you, I thought maybe it was a sign, my second chance.”

“Maybe it is,” Cas says, leaning forward and catching Benji’s eyes. “Maybe it’s your second chance at figuring out what you truly want in life. Maybe it’s your chance to shake things up, or maybe to figure out how to stop looking for people to fix and embrace people as they are. I don’t know. But I do know three things: one, there is someone perfect for you out there. Not perfect, but perfect for you. Two, you can create your own happiness. You don’t have to wait for someone to come along. And three, Bert and Ernie are definitely gay.”

Benji breaks into wet laughter at Cas’ attempt to lighten the mood with an old topic of discussion they used to tease Benji’s brother with, his usual retort being “gay guys think everyone is gay—they’re puppets!” “My family misses you, too, you know,” Benji says, wiping his face.

“I miss them, as well. Say hello for me.” He stands and collects their coffee cups to toss them into the trash, then stays standing. “It sucks that I have to tell Dean you’re his hairstylist. He’s liked the cuts he’s gotten from you. I miss your cuts, too. Frankly, my hair has never been quite as fabulous since.”

Benji smiles thinly as he gets Cas’ message that their conversation is over. He stands and gathers his coat. “Yeah. Dean, he’s, uh...it was never personal, you know.”

“I know.” He understands—he knows people do stupid things for love, his self-sacrificing boyfriend included—but he furrows his brows and adds, “But it was still underhanded and I’m still very angry about it. Never treat him that way again, understood?”

He hangs his head. “Understood. I’m sorry I went about it that way.”

Cas nods, then nudges his head toward the exit. Benji follows.

“Maybe someday we can be friends,” Benji says when they stop on the sidewalk. “I miss you and
I’d like to have you in my life.”

“You’d have to be able to manage your feelings,” Cas answers, “and Dean would have to be comfortable with it. I wouldn’t do it otherwise. My relationship with Dean is my priority.”

“Yeah, I understand.”

“Good.” Cas gives him a couple of quick pats on the shoulder as they part. “Take care of yourself, Benji.” Their eyes lock for a moment. Benjamin starts to lean in and Cas leans back. “Benji.”

“I had to make sure,” he shrugs. Cas rolls his eyes and turns him around, giving him a tiny shove. Benji’s seen too many romance movies, where a kiss cures all. He watches as his ex walks down the street and climbs into a sporty coupe. Inhaling a deep breath of frosty air, he turns and crosses the street toward Singer’s. After all that—and despite their recent problems—Dean is the only person he wants to see.

Rufus nods as Cas walks in. “He’s in his office.”

With a grateful nod in return, Cas knocks and steps into Dean’s small but neat office. Dean looks up at him with wide eyes. Upon seeing his boyfriend, Cas is filled with relief and adoration. He really loves the hell out of him, even if he’s been a stubborn asshole as of late. He rounds the desk, then turns Dean’s chair toward him and collapses into his arms. Dean’s arms wrap loosely around him in return. It feels uncertain, hesitant, but Cas thinks it’s because of their fight last night, or maybe the weeks of tension between them. He snuggles in closer and leans his head on Dean’s shoulder. “I just had the fucking weirdest conversation,” he confesses. “My ex came to see me. Benji.”

“Yeah?” Dean asks, his voice shaky but not surprised. Strange.

“Yeah. He wanted to get back together.”

He feels Dean nod as his grip loosens. “Oh.”

“He said he still loves me and thought we could try again since we’d both matured and whatnot. I couldn’t believe it.” Dean shakes his head but offers none of the commiserating commentary Cas expected, so he continues, “And what’s even crazier about it all is that he found out where I was through you because he’s your hairstylist.”

“All my fault,” Dean mumbles.

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, somehow through your conversations he figured out we were dating and my connection to the bakery.”

“Thought his name was Ken,” Dean growls bitterly.

“What? Oh...no, he owns ‘Hair by Kenneth,’ but he’s not Kenneth. He’s kind of like the Dread Pirate Roberts, you know? He’s not Kenneth, but most people assume he is so he doesn’t correct them. The guy before him wasn’t Kenneth, either, and neither was the guy before that. The salon has gained enough name recognition that no one ever bothers to change it.”

“Deceptive.”

“Yeah, I guess it is. Anyway, somehow through your conversations he figured out we were dating and my connection to the bakery.”

“All my fault,” Dean mumbles.

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, so he professed his undying love and went on about how life wouldn’t be so complicated with him and I—”

“It’s true,” he mumbles.
“I...guess, in some ways, maybe, but—Dean?” Cas stops when he feels Dean’s chest heaving under him.

“Please don’t leave me,” Dean begs in a wet, broken whisper. “I shouldn’t ask, I know I’m not as good as him, I know I’m a pain in the ass but please, I—I can’t...”

Castiel is bowled over by his boyfriend’s reaction. How could he ever think that I would leave? He straightens and tilts Dean’s face up. “Dean, sweetheart, I’m not leaving you.”

“You should, though.”

“I should? When I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in my life? When I’m so in love with you that all my wives make fun of my ‘stupid, lovesick face’? When everything from dating to health concerns to talking about my past feels easier, better with you? Why the hell should I leave you? I love you.”

Dean stares at him with huge, watery eyes. “Y-you...”

He knows what Dean’s hung up on, so he makes it clear. “Ti amo, Dean. I love you. I can say those words now because I know you’ll never use them against me, or hurt me, and when you say them to me I know you really mean it.”

“I do—”

“And I do, too.”

“—But I—everything’s complicated, Cas. We’ve had to fight for everything we have, and now maybe I’m sick, and you might have to take care of me and I’m supposed to do that for you and it’s not right, it’s not fair to you and—”

“Hey. When I said ti amo sempre, what did that mean to you? ‘I love you always unless you get sick’? ‘I love you always unless life gets too hard’? ‘I love you always unless you’re being a stubborn, self-sacrificing pain in the ass’? No, I meant ti amo sempre. I love you always. For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death and after. Always. I promise. I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

The glow of the desk lamp reflects in Dean’s soft green eyes, making him look even more vulnerable and beautiful and making Cas fall in love a little more. “Ti amo sempre, Cas. For richer, poorer, sick, healthy, forever. I promise. I’m sorry,” Dean whimpers, hugging him with fervor this time. Cas grips him just as tightly, feeling at ease for the first time in weeks. He’s in Dean’s arms and they love each other beyond a shadow of a doubt. That’s all he’s ever wanted.

“I told him there was no way I would ever get back together with him because I’m in love with you,” Cas assures him, sitting back and smoothing Dean’s brows with his thumbs.

“You told him that? That you’re in love with me?” Dean drops his face down when he adds, “That must’ve sucked for him to hear.”

Cas grins at the tiny smirk on his boyfriend’s face that he clearly didn’t want him to notice. While Dean may not be the jealous type, exactly, he sure is taking a bit of glee in the fact that Cas declared his love for Dean to his ex, to whom he could never say the same. “You like that, don’t you?” Dean shrugs with one shoulder and Cas laughs. He tilts Dean’s face up and kisses his smirk lightly. “I did tell him that, caro mio. I told him I’m in love with you and that I don’t care how complicated our lives are. He fought me on it, but I told him there were things you know that he never did, because I could be myself with you, and I told him you’re the one who taught me what love really is. I could never love him the way I love you. You are perfect for me, Dean. I’ve never felt as right as I do with
you, even when everything is going wrong.”

“Cas,” Dean whispers, then pulls him into a kiss full of desperate longing, the result of weeks of denial and distance. Cas quickly takes over, nipping and smoothing Dean’s lips as he cradles his face. Dean clings to him and dives into his mouth as if he can climb into Cas’ body, their closeness not enough. Hot surges of want shiver through him as Dean’s hands find Cas’ bare skin under his shirt. Cas leans into him, pushing him farther back until the chair nearly topples; Cas’ hands are the only things that save them from a painful fall. “Old chair,” Dean explains breathlessly as he goes right back to work, this time on Cas’ neck. Cas’ hands dig furrows through his boyfriend’s hair, completely undoing the careful styling he did earlier that day. Dean doesn’t seem to mind.

They continue like this, making out as if they’ll never have the opportunity again, until a knock interrupts them. “Uh, sorry to interrupt, but there’s a lady here who said she spoke to you earlier? You guys have an appointment?” Garth calls through the door. He sounds apologetic, at least.

“Yeah, be right out,” Dean calls. He pouts at Cas. “Later?”

“Later,” Cas laughs. They have many laters, he figures.

“Sorry I’ve been an ass. Didn’t even realize it’s your birthday.”

Cas frowns, confused. “What?”

“Oh, uh…” his boyfriend stammers, looking guilty. “I came over to see you when he showed up and said happy birthday. I left right after. Couldn’t stand to hear anything else.”

Pain pierces Cas’ heart as he thinks of his poor boyfriend witnessing that scene. “Oh, sweetheart. I’m sorry you had to hear that. It’s not my birthday, though.” At Dean’s quizzical look, Cas adds with a wave, “I’ll explain later.”

That night, the house is a much calmer, happier place. Dean kisses him soundly when he arrives home from work, and though the dark circles are still under his eyes, his face is glowing. It instantly calms Cas, as well as Bobby, who Cas knows has been worried sick about his nephew.

“I did something,” he admits later when they’re lying in bed. “Um, tomorrow at 1:00. They had a cancellation and the doc was willing to see me even though I cancelled before.”

“I’m relieved, Dean,” Cas says, stroking his face. “I know I got into nagging mode with you, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. I needed the kick in the pants.” He pauses, then admits, “I’m scared, Cas. I don’t want this to be anything serious, and I don’t want to be a burden to you.”

“Sweetheart. We’ve talked about burdens.”

“I know, but I’m a really heavy one, Cas.”

Cas sighs. Dean still doesn’t understand, or maybe he just doesn’t believe it. “Why do people choose to lift weights, even though they’re heavy and it would be easier not to put their bodies under the strain?”

Dean—used to Cas’ non-sequiturs, perhaps—simply answers, “To make themselves stronger?”

“Right. What we carry makes us stronger. The more weight we have, the stronger we can become as long as we are responsible about how much we take on and how we carry it. Sharing the load is one
way of ensuring that we get stronger without dropping the barbells.” He kisses Dean’s glabella.
“You make me stronger.”

“And we can carry even more together than separately,” Dean clarifies.

“You got it.” He exhales slowly, then backtracks to the conversation he tried to start before. “I used to nag my mother all the time because I worried so much about her. She was so ill, but she could’ve managed it better if she’d followed her treatment plan. But she wouldn’t. It made things so much harder. Nagging was the only control I had. But nagging doesn’t really give you control; it just give you the illusion of control. I didn’t figure that out for a long time. With you, I felt that loss of control again, and ti amo tanto that I got desperate. I forgot you have choices. I got stupid about it.”

“But it was ‘cause you were afraid, and probably ‘cause you knew I was afraid. Kinda like when you were havin’ a hard time deciding to date me and I kept on you about it.” Dean nods at his own words and snuggles into Cas’ side. He’s warm and solid and present, and Cas sighs in contentment. “I get it. Man, I was trying not to be like your mom, but I ended up being like your mom in another way by refusing treatment. And your dad…you said I was being like your dad.”

“Shutting me out,” Cas explains in response to Dean’s silent question.

“Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. We’re already doing better than they ever did. We’re talking about it. Even if it took a while to get here.” He tightens his arms around Dean. “Can I come with you tomorrow?”

“Yeah. I hope it goes okay.”

“Me too. But no matter what, Dean, I’m not leaving you. Ti amo sempre.”

“Ti amo sempre.” Dean kisses him, long and sweet. “Hey,” he says suddenly, “what’s the deal with your birthday?” Cas explains the joke, which leads to the obvious question, “So when is your birthday?”

It’s still hard to think about, but it’s gotten easier thanks to Dean. “It’s the day my mom died.”

“Oh, Cas,” Dean whispers. He presses a kiss to his forehead and pulls him close. “Thanks for telling me.” Cas burrows into Dean’s warmth and imagines their breaths are gold, filling the cracks of their fragile hearts and making them stronger and more beautiful.

Chapter End Notes

Hope that makes up for last chapter! <3

You may have noticed we have just a few chapters left!

Some people have been concerned about how this will end. If you’re feeling anxious about it, you’re welcome to message me on Twitter (I’m @followuenergy) and I’m happy to talk to you about it! (If you follow me already on Twitter, thank you and I’m sorry I’m super boring on there. With life stuff and writing going on, I haven’t even been on there in a couple of weeks. I promise I will, though! I noticed some new people, so thank you!)
Next chapter: Life gives them a break. :D
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Here it is, the chapter they—and all of you—deserve.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

So it wasn’t a death sentence. It wasn’t even all that bad. Though it would be a lifelong thing, medication should hopefully keep him from having any more seizures. They don’t know what’s causing his tonic-clonic and absence seizures, but the doctor assured him that more than half of the people diagnosed with seizure disorders have no known cause for them. He was free to carry on with his life as usual.

It hasn’t stopped him from treading carefully, though. Or from feeling guilty.

“Thank God it’s somethin’ controllable, somethin’ that’ll let you have a normal life,’” Bobby had said when he told him the news. “Glad you checked, son. I was worried for ya. You deserve to have a good life after all the shit you’ve been through.” Dean made a joke and changed the subject. He couldn’t talk about it with his uncle. He just couldn’t.

“You need to talk about it with your uncle,” Cas told him. Dean knew he would. “You’re doing the survivors’ guilt thing and you’re just going to make things awkward between the two of you. He doesn’t need your pity.”

Dean had wanted to rip Cas a new one for that, and did. Of course, Cas stood there as if Dean wasn’t firing a flamethrower at him. He was impervious to Dean’s anger, as always. It was completely frustrating how cool Cas could be, especially when Dean was fired up.

He was right, of course. He must’ve gotten to Bobby, too, because now they’re having sharing and caring time.

“You ain’t gotta feel all self-conscious about havin’ some good happen to you,” Bobby says while Dean’s assisting him with his evening routine. “I don’t want you to be sick.”

“I’m not—”

“Oh, don’t bother shovelin’ shit my way, I got enough. Now, I can tell you feel bad or guilty or whatever cockamamie thing, but you don’t gotta. We all got our stuff to carry. This is mine. You feelin’ guilty ain’t gonna change that. Just makes me feel worse ‘cause you don’t feel free to live.”

Breathing deeply, Dean gives up any further denial. “Yeah, okay.”

“We ain’t all into talkin’ and whatnot, but Cas made a good point to me—”

“I should’ve known.”

“Now hush up and listen. Life is meant to be lived, no matter what you got. I felt like shit when your Aunt Karen got sick because she was so much worse off than I was. Even now, I look back and hell, I just…” Bobby swallows and Dean gives him a moment as he quietly, gently slides pajamas onto Bobby’s legs. “I ain’t gonna pretend this is easy, and I ain’t gonna pretend I wouldn’t like to walk
again or stand up and take a piss by myself. But hell, I’ve lived a long time now, longer than Karen and lots of others, and I spent a lot of it feelin’ sorry for myself, and for you, too. But I don’t feel so bad now. Got my days, but overall it’s a decent life I got. I’m livin’ it to the fullest now, makin’ the best of it. You oughta, too.” He pauses, then adds, “Cas tell you he’s gonna take me shootin’? Haven’t shot a rifle in a long time.”

Dean’s mouth twists into a frown. Cas had mentioned going to the gun range sometime and bringing Bobby along, but Bobby’s making it sound like he’s actually going to participate instead of watch. “Are you gonna shoot?” At his nod, Dean asks, “How’re you going to do that?”

“He’s gonna hold it. I’ll tell him where to aim and when to shoot. Your brother wants to come.”

“Really?” Sam has never really been into that kind of stuff.

“Really. I want you to come, too. Take the day off, or at least part of it. Cas said we’ll go out to Sofia’s after to ‘balance out the testosterone’ or somethin’.”

Dean laughs. “I think he just wants you to have a chance to see your girlfriend.”

“Would you stop that?” Bobby blusters through the flush creeping into his cheeks. Though nothing overtly romantic or sexual has happened between Bobby and Sofia (Dean’s not even sure if Bobby can have sex or what the mechanics of that would be and he is not spending any more brain cells thinking about that), it’s pretty clear they enjoy each other.

“Ooh, maybe we can invite Ellen, too. A love triangle!”

“Shut it!”

Dean laughs again at Bobby’s obvious discomfort. Both Ellen and Sofia have been great for him, and though there’s more of a warm friendship between him and Ellen, that doesn’t mean Dean won’t tease him about it. It feels good to talk to him like this, to be able to joke and to talk about more serious things too and...oh God, they’re sharing feelings and it feels good. Damn his boyfriend for being right. And, well, since they’re sharing and caring anyway...“Thanks, Bobby,” Dean blurts.

“For?” he asks with a quirk of his brow.

“For...um, for wanting the best for me, and for not wanting me to feel guilty, and for being willing to...I don’t know. To live, I guess...to get out of feeling sorry for yourself and take a chance at...man, I don’t know, I’m crap at this but...you’ve been a great example to me to never give up, and to live the best life I can, and to trust that there’s still good in life. And, you know, loving me even when I was a douche. So, I guess just...thanks for being the best dad I ever had.”

“Aw, hell, kid,” Bobby chokes. “Go an’ cuddle your boyfriend or somethin’, alright? I’m gettin’ twitchy with all the feelings.”

Dean laughs but doesn’t leave. He won’t have much more time with him, he realizes with a startling clarity, and he’s wasted so much already not appreciating what he has. Instead, he lies down next to his uncle. There’s not a lot of room, but there’s enough to hang out for a little while. “Remember when I dared Sammy to drink that bottle of tabasco and he puked all over the car when we were going to the ballfield?”

“Coulda killed you and your blasted brother for that. Car stunk for a week.”

They laugh for a long time as they reminisce. When Dean sees Bobby’s eyes close, he gets up and bids him goodnight. Before he goes, Bobby calls him back in a slurred, sleepy voice. “You’re one of
the best sons I ever had, kid,” he mumbles. “Be happy, will ya?”

Dean does not cry...until he crawls into bed with Cas, who says nothing but loops his arms around him and holds him. He still marvels at how Cas just seems to know what people need, even when they don’t know themselves. When he’s calmer, he says, “Helping him shoot, huh?”

“Oh. Mmmhmm. Eventually, when I can set it up.”

“You...fuck.” He snuggles closer as he feels the warm comfort of sleep overtaking him, which he doesn’t want, not yet. It’s been too long since they’ve had more than a hand job, between the stress and the fighting and Dean’s secret fear that he would do something to make himself have another seizure. “Ti amo, Cas. You’re just...the best. Fuck, I’m tired, but God, I need some time with you and—”

“I’m right here. Sleep, sweetheart.” Cas shushes him and holds him still until he gives in, drifting away tucked securely into his boyfriend’s side.

He is running very late in the morning thanks to oversleeping (sleep that, truthfully, he’d needed desperately). He has to skip a shower and satisfy himself with brushing his teeth and giving Cas a quick, wet kiss. Cas rubs his damp forehead along Dean’s face playfully. It makes him groan. What he wouldn’t give to climb into the shower with him for a few minutes or hours or days, whatever. His mind wanders to the sexy silhouette of Cas behind the shower curtain and the tickle of his wet hair the rest of the mercilessly long day, keeping him in a near-constant state of arousal. Five o’clock can’t come soon enough.

At 4:00, there’s a knock at the door. Benny pokes his head in, looking more flustered than he’s ever seen him. “Uh, you got someone waitin’ for you.”

Dean frowns at Benny, who hasn’t been here all day, then at his schedule. “I don’t have any appointments.”

“Car’s in the bay. Requested you specifically. Insisted on it. I’m headin’ out. See ya.” He slams the door behind him. Dean stares at it before he rolls his eyes and sighs. Entitled asshole, barging in here and demanding to see the owner for his precious car. These people are all the same. Dean plasters on a winning smile before he steps into the waiting area, where his jaw drops at the gorgeous specimen before him. Dark suit, blue-and-red striped tie, shiny black shoes, hair swept neatly into place, hands soft and manicured, cologne floating lightly across the short space between them. And glasses. Holy mother of God, he’s totally rocking Dean’s businessman kink.

“Mr. Winchester.”

Dean swallows. “Cas.”

“Mr. Novak, if you please. Or Castiel, if we become...friendly.” He leans on the tall counter that separates them. “I’d like you to take a look under my hood.” With his gaze floating up Dean’s body and settling on his eyes, he adds, “You’re the only one I trust. I want you.”

Oh fuck, he looks so fucking good and his voice and the trust and fuck... “Uh, yes, sir.” Cas’ eyes glitter and his lips spread into a smirk. Oh, he likes that. And fuck, I do, too. But wait, the guys don’t leave until...he looks around and no one is there. Motherfucking hot, entitled bastard made his employees go home so he could fuck him. Fuck.

Dean heads toward the work area when Cas stops him. “Don’t forget to use protection,” he purrs, eyeing the coveralls on peg hooks. Dean groans under his breath as he dons a suit and wastes no
time getting to Cas’ car, which is parked in the middle bay with its hood propped open. He glances at Cas, who simply stands to the side and watches. He’s not sure what to do now. Well, might as well check things out. Maybe that’s what Cas wants. He starts poking around, actually examining parts under the hood when Cas presses against his back, his erection thick and full against his ass. Dean gulps. “Tell me what you’re doing,” Cas—Mr. Novak, Castiel, sex god—demands.

“Uh, well, gonna check your reservoir and...uh, this is the dipstick for your oil. I, uh, dip this into your oil to see if you—if your engine has enough, uh, oil for, uh, lubrication,” he splutters.

“Mmm. Lubrication is important for my engine. Show me.”

Dean is aching as he shows Cas how to check the oil, Cas touching him as much as possible without actually doing anything Dean really wants. “You’ll get your suit dirty,” he protests when Cas tries to take the dirty rag from him.

“Maybe I want to get my suit dirty,” he purrs in his ear. “Maybe I want to bend over this car with my mechanic and learn the importance of...lubrication.” His mouth glides over Dean’s ear as his hands do the same over his hips. “I just need someone willing to make me dirty. Will you make me dirty, Mr. Winchester?”

Dean mewls. The idea of messing up that suit...it’s too much. He drops the hood down and swings Cas around, slamming him against the grill. Cas’ eyes light up as Dean ruts against him, desire and power sweeping through him as he bites into Cas’ perfect skin along his neck and sucks hard. Cas cries out and jerks his hips forward. It’s going to be over in no time if they don’t slow down—and Cas growling and calling him Mr. Winchester is not helping. He tugs him away from the vehicle. “Your service is done,” Dean rasps, “and since you insisted on asking for the owner, you’re gonna have to pay him personally in his office.”

“Mmm, yes, sir,” Cas purrs, then grins as he breaks character for a moment. Dean laughs and tucks his hands under his ass, picking him up and carrying him to his office as they pepper each other with hot yet playful kisses.

Dean plants Cas on the floor, then sweeps everything but his laptop and a lamp off his desk. “I always wanted to do that,” he beams, so proud of himself as he peeks behind him at his boyfriend, who’s watching him with fondness that makes Dean’s heart thump. He rounds the desk and moves his laptop to a shelf as Cas moves the lamp. When he turns back to his boyfriend, he’s sitting on the desk and urging Dean to him with heated eyes. Dean is too happy to follow.

“Wanna fuck you in that damn suit so bad,” Dean growls against his lips. “Shake you up.”

“Do it,” Cas whispers. “Take me, shake me up, make me dirty.”

Dean whines as he grabs Cas’ face and rips his glasses off, then kisses him with clashing teeth and swallowed moans. They break only for air or to grumble at stuck buttons. When Cas tells him to just rip open his dress shirt, Dean does so with a terrific rush of lust and excitement as tiny buttons fly across the room. His tie is looser but stays in place against his chest, and Dean can’t get enough of the juxtaposition of power and vulnerability. Cas quickly distracts him, though, divesting him of his coveralls and shirt, then they both slip their pants and boxers down, leaving them at their ankles.

“Lube for when you’re ready,” Cas croaks breathlessly, handing him the tube he dug out of his pocket. Dean grabs it hurriedly and tosses it aside in favor of more hard, heated kisses. He’s missed Cas so much, missed being this kind of physical with him. Everything recently has been so careful. Now Cas is giving him this, the very thing he needs now—energy, life, power.
'Fuck, you knew just what I needed, didn’t you?’

Cas stops and gazes at him. “What we needed,” he says, and hell if that doesn’t make him want to both drill him and cuddle the shit out of him. “Now, Mr. Winchester, sir, how about making my engine purr?’

“That was terrible,” Dean laughs, the giddiness of being with the person he loves, playing with control and power and roles that no one’s pushed them into, bubbling into his throat. “But God, ti amo for it, tesoro mio.”

“I’m trying here!” Cas laughs in return, his cheeks stained pink from arousal and the warmth of the affection Dean gives him that always makes him soft and supple. His human Snugli. “Lube up and jam your dipstick into me, would you?’

“Where’d you learn to be such a brat, Cas?’

“I learned it by watching you, Dean,” he smirks.

Dean shakes his head and presses his tongue into his mouth. While keeping him occupied, he lubes up his fingers, pulls Cas to the edge of the desk, and inserts one at a time, savoring each moan he pulls from him. He sucks in a breath as Cas finds the lube and pours it onto Dean’s cock, then starts jacking him. Breaths of “more, please” and “fuck, Dean” skate across his face; he breathes “anything, baby” and “fuck, Cas” in return. When Cas looks like he’s going to do the job himself if Dean doesn’t get on with it, he pulls Cas off the desk, turns him, and bends him over. “God, you’re beautiful,” Dean whispers as he smooths a hand up his boyfriend’s back.

“Fuck me, you sap,” Cas grinds out. Dean knows he’s blushing again, and it makes him smile. He pushes into him slowly, letting him adjust, until he’s buried in him. “Fuck me,” Cas says again, more a strained plea than a demand, as he tosses his tie over his shoulder. He takes Cas in—his mussed hair, his bare skin, the tie draped over his back, the gold watch adorning his wrist, his neat pants pooled at his buffed shoes—and he lets himself go, thrusting over and over as Cas’ knuckles whiten against the peeling edge of the cherry laminate on his cheap desk. His thrusts push them onto their toes, and it seems to drive Cas wild. Dean rests on Cas’ back as he leans forward and takes Cas’ cock in hand; it’s dripping with his own lubrication. Dean adds the fake stuff and jacks him as he maintains a grinding rhythm. Shortly, Cas cries out; come spurts across his desk and the floor, and the sight is enough to send Dean over the edge, too, filling Cas until he’s spent.

“I hope you don’t offer that service to everyone,” Cas jokes with a deep, drowsy voice, muffled a bit because his face is now pressed into the surface of the desk.

“Only super-hot men named Castiel Novak.”

“Let’s hope there’s not another one out there, then.”

“Only super-hot men named Castiel Novak who are my boyfriend.”

“Better.”

Dean chuckles as the heat from Cas’ face leaves an imprint on the desk. He pulls out of him and urges him to stand, then turns him and kisses him tenderly. “I fucking love you. Ti amo sempre, tesoro mio.”

“Now, see, that other Castiel Novak wouldn’t understand what you’re saying, so I think I’m safe.” Cas smiles shyly, his teeth just peeping from the seam of his lips. He presses his lips to Dean’s again, then grabs the box of tissues Dean swept off his desk and mops up himself and said desk. He
wipes Dean up too, then pushes him into his desk chair and sits in his lap, perching his head on his shoulder and sighing contentedly. **Damn, he’s adorable.**

“I have to know,” Dean says after a long while just sitting quietly together, “how did you get everyone to clear out? And furthermore, why the hell did they listen to you?”

“Well, here’s the thing. I told Garth I wanted to surprise you and asked if he could close up shop early, and he was agreeable, so that was easy. What was unexpected was that Benny came in to work a bit on a restoration. I guess he and Andrea fought or something? Anyway, he came in just as everyone left, so I told him what I told Garth. He gave me a bit of a hard time, so I told him that either you or I were getting bent over something in this shop in the next hour and he could stick around or not, didn’t matter to me. He chose to leave.”

Despite the fact that Cas shut down his shop for sex (or maybe because of it), Dean laughs. “You’re a little shit.”

Cas’ proud grin fades as he quiets. “Hmm. I thought I was being spontaneous and daring, but looking back, I probably should’ve just waited until closing. It really wasn’t my business to do this.”

Dean chucks him under the chin, not wanting to lose the good feelings between them. “Hey, I ain’t complaining, I promise. I love my ballsy boyfriend.” He grins and kisses Cas soundly. “Ready to go home?”

“Actually,” Cas says, his own grin returning, “we aren’t going home.”

They head to Charlie and Jo’s instead to shower and drop off Dean’s car (“it’s winter, Dean, and where we’re going we don’t want to get stuck”), grab burgers at a drive-through, then make the nearly three hour drive to—**holy shit.**

**The Poconos? Dude.**

“And not just any room, either,” Cas says with a wiggle of his brows. “Come on.”

They check in and Cas takes his hand as they make their way to their room. “Wait’ll you see this,” he says, smiling ear to ear as he opens the door and ushers Dean inside. Dean’s jaw drops to his feet.

A champagne glass whirlpool bath that’s taller than them. A heart-shaped pool. A huge, round bed. Mirrors on the ceiling. Egyptian artwork that seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the room. Red carpet **everywhere.** “Oh, Cas. Dude. **Dude!**” Dean laughs. He can’t help it.

“I know! It’s like the 70s threw up in here!” he gushes, throwing his arms out and running toward the bed. He skewers the red and white covers as he slides onto the bed like he’s stealing home plate. Dean follows, leaping onto the mattress and kissing the best friend, the best lover, the best everything he’s ever had. Cas grips him tightly and rolls them so Cas is hovering over him. “I had to get the cheesiest thing I could think of,” he smiles. “In the summer we can do a cabin or something, but for now I just needed to get us the hell alone, pronto, and I found this and it just seemed...right, somehow. We’re away, but not too far away. It’s hilariously over-the-top romantic. Everything’s included, so we can do whatever we want or do nothing. We can totally relax and just take care of ourselves and each other.” Cas plants soft, breathy kisses up his neck. “We can sleep late...get massages in our room...gorge ourselves on steak and lobster...fuck in the tub...fuck in the bed...fuck on this ugly-ass carpet...”

As Cas continues, Dean shakes his head affectionately. Just last night he told Cas he needed time with him, and today he does this. He knew just what Dean wanted and needed, always does. Dean is
completely overwhelmed by the love welling up in his chest, love he sees reflected in Cas’ eyes when he stops and looks at him. He wants to tell him everything—how grateful he is, how sorry he is for being a prick the last several weeks, how awed he is that Cas chose him, trusts him after everything he’s been through. “I’m sensing you have a plan here,” Dean chuckles instead. “And I’m totally in.” Cas grins, and Dean understands that maybe he doesn’t really need to say all of it. Maybe Cas already knows.

They order a cheese and cracker tray from room service and share a shower while they wait. When it arrives, Cas opens the bottle of wine chilling in their room (in a real champagne bucket, he teases Dean) and arranges the plates while Dean glances at the clock. It’s almost time for Bobby’s evening routine. He sits at the table and starts to call home to make sure everything is okay, but Cas swipes his phone away, then takes both of their phones and places them in the in-room safe, keying in a code. “Everyone’s going to be fine. If something we need to know about happens, they’ll call the hotel. Now, the code is the same code as the alarm at home. You can take your phone out of the safe if you want and make your call, or you can trust in everyone at home and it can be all about us—just us—for the next four days. Mine’s staying in the safe. What do you want to do?”

They cuddle together in front of the fireplace, food and wine between them and phones nowhere in sight.

The night they arrive is spent without sex, too exhausted from the drive and the sex they already had at the garage. The morning makes up for it, the whipped topping meant for Cas’ waffles the inspiration for a tasty exploration of each other’s bodies. They spend the rest of the morning in bed, watching trash TV and sharing strawberries. Dean’s hand itches for his phone every so often, but he kisses Cas each time it happens, consciously choosing him, and the urge disappears. In the afternoon they order lunch in, use their pool, then decide to try out the champagne glass whirlpool before dinner (for which they reluctantly decide they’ll leave the room)

“We have to get it bubbly like the ads,” Cas insists. When they do, Dean can’t resist grabbing his phone from the safe to take photos. They both climb in and Dean snaps a couple of shots, then plops suds on Cas’ head and takes a couple more. Cas grabs Dean’s phone and says “Come here,” then drags him into a kiss and snaps a photo. It gives Dean ideas about some other things he might like to photograph...or record, perhaps. The thought excites him, and maybe he’ll suggest it to Cas sometime, but not this trip. This time around, he wants nothing distracting him from their time together. He plucks the phone from Cas’ hand and tosses it aside, settling himself against him and resuming their liplock, which is exactly the kind of distraction he wants. When they’re waterlogged, Dean leads Cas to their bed and takes charge, loving the power he feels in his life once again and the way Cas yields to him, fully trusting. They switch after dinner, Cas in charge this time and Dean trusting Cas to care for him without fear. The push/pull, give-and-take of their lovemaking (and their relationship) is intoxicating, and it fills Dean with joy and hope for the future, whatever it brings.

The rest of their time at the resort is much the same as their first day—sleeping in, making love, eating, bathing, and relaxing. Cas asks him if he wants to go skiing or do some of the activities that are offered at the resort, but he really doesn’t want to and Cas doesn’t seem to mind. Dean has the fleeting thought that maybe they should, that they’re wasting an opportunity and who knows when they’ll have another vacation, but Cas reassures him that the only opportunity he wants to take advantage of is Dean. It’s heaven, a heaven Dean never thought he’d get to visit. So of course, he’s quite reluctant to leave when the time comes. He wants to convince Cas to stay here forever, where all they have to do is care for and enjoy each other. There is no sickness here, no worries about being enough or too much, no one whose lives were marred with sorrow or shitty parents or circumstances they didn’t deserve. There is only them.

“Those things didn’t leave us,” Cas explains when Dean pours his heart out. “They were always
here, always a part of us. But we were able to have a great time anyway. We were able to leave it all for a while and be us, just the basic us. You and me.”

“I’m afraid all the good stuff will go to shit and disappear when we get home, Cas.”

“I’m not, because the good stuff has always been a part of us, too. When things were at their toughest, we were still the basic you and me, and we stuck together.” Cas kisses him lightly as he squeezes his hand. His touch is warm and reassuring. “It’s always going to be this way, caro. There will always be something waiting for us to work through, because life is relentless like that. That’s why we have to be relentless, too. And hell if you aren’t the most relentless person I know.”

Dean smiles softly. “Good thing I am,” he says, feeling even more love and gratitude for Cas than he ever has. “And good thing you are, too.” They both know what he means, if Cas’ glistening eyes are anything to go by.

“We are a good thing.” Cas smiles softly back as he strokes Dean’s face. “We’ll go back to the real world today, but we don’t need to leave this behind. We’ll build on it, defend it. When life pushes us around, we’ll push back. When we’re feeling pulled apart, we’ll pull each other closer. Okay?”

As if acting out his words, Dean pulls Cas tightly against his chest. “Okay.”

And the next time life’s relentless tide washes over them, they pull each other closer.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, the feels! 😊

One more chapter and an epilogue to go. ❤

Next chapter: Plans are made.
It’s been a few weeks since Cas and Dean returned from their getaway. Bobby did very well, as Cas knew he would, and even though Sam looked a little tired, he also looked happy. It was good for him. Allie was an able and willing helper, making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that Bobby declared the best he ever had. Everyone else had helped greatly, too. Cas had no doubt it would go well, but the fact that everyone was still in one piece seemed to ease Dean’s mind greatly. Since then he’s looked stronger, happier, with a spring in his step that has carried into the bedroom in a very satisfactory way. Bobby, too, has looked quite content. He said it was because he’d needed the break from Cas and Dean’s faces, which might be a little true, but Cas suspects it was because he got to spend some one-on-one time with Sam.

The news of their friend Frank’s death, though, has brought a bit of darkness to their brighter days.

Frank worked at the garage many years ago, when Bobby was still there. Only Benny knew him from those days; Garth had been his replacement when Frank left. Dean grew up with Frank around and saw him as a good guy, if a little out there with some of his conspiracy theories. Cas could relate, his mother having plenty of theories of her own. Dean is sad, but not in a heavy-hearted way; he remembers him fondly but time and distance have lessened the sting of the news. Bobby, though, considered Frank a friend despite not having seen him in several years, and they were the same age. Cas imagines it has brought up not only the pain of losing a friend, but thoughts of his own mortality. He’s proven right the day after the funeral, when Bobby asks Sam to come for dinner.

“I want to get my affairs in order,” Bobby says to Dean and Sam when they’re eating dessert. Cas is grateful that Charlie took Allie for pizza and “girls’ time,” because he has a feeling this isn’t going to be pretty.

“Whaddaya mean?” Dean asks. “We have the POA in place and my name’s on all the bank stuff.”

“I mean my will.”

“You mean, like, Last Will and Testament kind of will?” Sam asks, his voice pitching higher than usual.

“Yeah, that, and also my living will. And I wanna make my arrangements with the funeral home and buy my grave marker and pick my suit. That sorta thing.”

“Is something wrong?” The younger Winchester brother looks like he’s about to hurl into space, while the older one just looks like he’s going to hurl.

“Naw.” Bobby turns his head and Cas gives him a sip of his water. “Just... Frank’s death and all,
made me think.”

Dean glances at his brother and clears his throat. “Yeah, I get it, but we don’t have to do that now. You still have a long—”

“No, son, I probably don’t. And hell, none of us really knows, do we? I mean, Sam, you must have a will or somethin’ for Allie’s sake.” Sam shifts in his chair. “Aw, hell, son, you don’t?”

“I never wanted to think about it!”

“Boy, you oughta. There’s a lot more at stake there than just where they throw your body.”

Cas snickers to himself as Dean mutters, “Jesus, Bobby.”

“You ain’t got one either, do you?”

Dean, of course, does not.

“Well, I ain’t askin’ your permission. I’m doin’ it. I’m gonna call Gabe and see if he’ll draw somethin’ up for me, and I’m gonna make my arrangements. If you knuckleheads won’t help me, then I’ll get Cas to do it.” Bobby looks at him and Cas nods as he offers him a bit of sugar-free apple pie. “So that’s it. You boys want anythin’ special in this dump, label it. Otherwise I’ll do as I see fit. Questions?”

There are none, and the evening as well as the next few days are very quiet. Dean often looks far away, lost in his thoughts. Cas knows that thinking about his uncle’s death and making plans for his funeral must be a lot for Dean to process. It certainly was for him with his mother, except that he did it all alone and suddenly, without the benefit of pre-planning, at barely eighteen years old. He knows that death will come, even if the brothers hope it won’t. He knows that Bobby doing this ahead of time will be a huge benefit to the brothers, even if their fear doesn’t allow them to see that right now. He knows that talking about it is better than not talking about it, even if the brothers would rather avoid the pain. He doesn’t tell Dean what he knows. He simply tells him “I’m here for you” and offers him sanctuary in his arms, which Dean accepts. They pull together.

Dean and Sam choose not to go “death shopping,” as Dean puts it, so Cas and Bobby go alone. They start at The Bee’s Knees with coffee. “Might as well make a morning of it,” Cas says, and Bobby agrees. For someone who’s planning for his demise, he’s cheerful.

“Hey, heard about the death shopping, nice!” Charlie calls by way of greeting. She gets a few strange looks from her newer patrons, but the regulars aren’t fazed by what comes out of her mouth. “People as ornery as you don’t die, but good to be prepared anyway, Bobby-Boo.”

“Yeah, yeah, Red, gimme a coffee with two Splenda,” Bobby gruffs good-naturedly.

They enjoy their coffees, then head to the funeral parlor. Cas notices that his eyes water immediately upon entering the quiet, softly-lit lobby. He pulls him aside, appointment be damned. “What’s happening, Bobby?” he asks.

“Damn incense or whatever they use in these damn places,” he mutters. “Hate the smell of it. Hate havin’ to think of a ceremony here. Had Karen’s here and it was just...miserable.”

“It doesn’t have to be here. It doesn’t have to be at any place like this.”

“I mean, I don’t care, I’ll be dead, but...I don’t know what else to do. Just don’t want you boys to have to deal with all the pomp and that damn smell. It was weeks before I got it outta my head. Bad
memories.”

Cas is touched at his inclusion with Bobby’s “boys,” and he’s fairly certain what Bobby’s trying to say with the rest of it. “You can have the ceremony anywhere you think would bring comfort to your loved ones. You don’t have to have it here. You can have it in the backyard, or the cemetery, or wherever.”

“Yeah...yeah.” He pauses. “I wish the other two were here to tell me what they want.”

“I know.” Cas sits on a high-backed burgundy settee and places a hand on Bobby’s shoulder. “It’s hard for them, you know. They love you like crazy.”

Bobby sniffs. “I know. Me too. Those boys, they just...me and Karen couldn’t have kids.” Cas nods and Bobby sighs. “Anyway, I just wanna do right by ’em. Ain’t gonna live forever.”

“Well, maybe think of a place that was special to all of you. You’re going to be buried next to Karen, right? So the memorial service itself can be anywhere. It can even be after you’re buried if you want.”

“Yeah.” They sit for awhile in silence. To his credit, the employee in the suit stands out of Bobby’s view, waiting but not interrupting. “Thanks for bein’ here, son. I know this goes beyond your job and whatnot, but I’m glad you’re here.”

“I think you know you’re more than a job to me,” Cas says softly. “And if not, it’s high time I told you.”

Bobby looks up at him with kind, clear eyes. “I know, kid. And, uh, you know I consider you...you know...one’a mine, too, don’cha?”

Cas squeezes his shoulder for a long moment, blinking away tears. “Yeah.”

“Good. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Bobby meets with the suited man and decides to be cremated ("It’s cheaper and this body is shit, anyway, so good riddance to it"), choosing and paying for his urn and the cremation expenses. That finished, Cas helps him into the van. They planned to go suit shopping, but since he’s being cremated, there’s no need for that. Cas asks to take him shopping anyway, because it’s been a long time since he’s had new clothes. “What would Tan say about your wardrobe, Bobby?” he teases. Bobby, who’s gotten as into Queer Eye as Cas and Dean are, rolls his eyes but agrees. He purchases a couple of pairs of soft but flattering pants, a polo, and a flannel shirt that’s on clearance, and looks relieved not to have to go near the “monkey suits.” Cas talks him into a new cap “because your other one is ready to burn, for fuck’s sake,” then they eat some lunch at the Roadhouse before heading home. It’s been a sad but peaceful mission.

Cas knew the peace wouldn’t last.

“Bobby, please, you gotta think about this,” Sam pleads that night, face blotchy from crying. Gabe is at the house to help Bobby with the legal paperwork.

“I don’t wanna be kept alive with machines,” Bobby explains. “It ain’t worth it.”

“Of course you’re worth it!” Sam insists. Dean rocks on his heels when he’s not pacing around the room. He’s quiet.

“You ain’t livin’ in this body, Sam.”
“But still, Bobby, you have a life worth living!”

“Yeah, I do, and when it’s over, it’s over. That’s it. Done. I’m okay with that.”

Cas watches Dean as Sam and Bobby argue. He’s becoming more and more agitated—fists clenching, breathing quickening—but he says nothing. When the volume in the argument increases, Dean’s face crumbles and he strides out of the room and up the stairs. Cas follows, finding him in their room. “Dean?”

“It’s so hard, Cas,” Dean weeps, his face contorted in pain as he clutches the comforter under his fingers. “I’m trying. I’m trying to let him make his own decisions, trying to mind my own business, but it’s so hard.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Cas murmurs as he collects him into his arms. “I know.”

“He wants me to pull the plug on him! How’m I gonna do that? It’ll have to be me, Sammy can’t handle it. Fuck, how the fuck can I do that?”

Rocking him slowly, Cas quietly assures him, “If you have to do it, you will find the strength. You won’t want him to suffer, and you’ll know you’re carrying out his wishes. And I’ll be with you, Dean. You won’t have to do it alone. You won’t ever have to be alone, as long as I’m alive. I promise.”

Dean sobs and clutches onto Cas’ shirt, smearing tears and saliva onto his chest. “Ti amo, Cas,” he stammers through hitched breaths.

“Ti amo too, Dean. Sempre.” Cas kisses the cowlick that Dean carefully combs into place every day. “I’m so proud of you. I know this is very hard for you.”

Dean snuggles into his arms a little longer, then catches his breath as he stands and wipes his eyes. “Should head back down,” he announces, then takes Cas’ hand. “Rescue Bobby.”

“Dean!” Sammy cries when they enter the dining room again. “Bobby doesn’t even wanna be resuscitated! Talk sense into him!”

“Can’t do that, Sam,” Dean says with a shake of his head. “It’s his life, his choice.”

“But to not even let himself be resuscitated? Dean—”

“I know, Sam. It’ll be okay.”

“You’re just gonna let him die? Dean, if he has another heart attack at home, Cas can’t do anything to help him! And neither can we!”

Dean stares at the floor and nods. “I know.”

“And you’re just gonna let him do this? You’re his power of attorney, why can’t—”

“Come outside with me,” Cas gently commands Sam, lifting him by the arm. Sam reluctantly follows until they’re bracing themselves against the railing and the chill of the evening. “This is your issue, Sam, not your uncle’s and not your brother’s,” Cas tells him.

“He’s not thinking clearly, Cas—”

“I’m not worried about Bobby’s thinking. He is still mentally competent to make decisions for himself. Your thinking, however, is concerning.”
“What? I’m competent! I’m—"

“No. I mean you are very emotional right now, which is normal when someone you love is talking about their death, but your emotional outburst is going to hurt Bobby and maybe compromise him enough to make him agree to things he doesn’t really want.”

Sam rakes his long fingers through his longer hair. “He’s just depressed or something, he has—”

“Actually, he’s not in a depressed state. He is, I suspect, far happier than he’s been in years.” Cas reaches out and grasps Sam’s arm gently. “He’s making these decisions for himself because he feels like he has freedom and control over his life, and the support he needs to see them carried out. He didn’t need to do this with the two of you. He could’ve done this in secret, all on his own. But he didn’t want that. He wanted the two of you involved, because he loves you and trusts you. No one likes talking about this, Sam, and I know your heightened emotions are, in part, because you feel like you just got him back and you’re rekindling your relationship with him. But this isn’t about you, Sam. He just wants to make sure that he does everything he can to live his life on his terms. And talking about this isn’t going to make him die tomorrow. The truth is, none of us know how long we have left. He wants to make this as easy as this sort of thing can be on a loved one, which is basically taking it from really sucky to a little less sucky.”

Drying his eyes with the backs of his hands, Sam exhales and nods. Cas knows he may not accept it today, or next week, or even a year from now, but it’s a start. He’s planted some seeds that will hopefully take root.

“It’s all done,” Dean calls out the door a little while later. Cas is grateful; though he wasn’t going to rush Sam back in when he knew he was uncomfortable, the chill is soaking through his jeans and light sweatshirt. Sam seems more settled, for which everyone is grateful.

That night, Cas assists Bobby with his routine. “How about the gun range next Wednesday?” he asks. He felt bad that he couldn’t get him there before now, but the timing hadn’t worked out since they got back from the Poconos. “My buddy said that would be a good time to come.”

“Sounds good,” Bobby agrees.

“Good. I’ll let Dean and Sam know. You doing okay?” He’s checking a pressure spot as he says it, but he’s fairly certain Bobby understands what he means.

“Yeah, I’m alright. They’re good boys.”

“Yes, they are. They’re going to miss the hell out of you. Me too.”

“Don’t know why sometimes.”

“Me neither. You have terrible taste in sports teams. Watching them with you is such a chore, especially with baseball season coming and your Minnesota Twits...”

“You say another word about the Twins and I’ll pop ya, ya idjit.”

“Yes, sir,” Cas laughs. He finishes Bobby’s skin care and dressing and positions him on the bed, elevating his feet and putting the neuropathy boots on them. “And you know why we’re gonna miss you. We love you.”

“Aw, stop it, kid.”

Bobby’s eyes dart around the room, avoiding Cas’ gaze. Cas confirms the point again, because
Bobby needs to hear it. “We do and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

“Thought you didn’t say that.”

“I didn’t. But I do now, to a select few.” He raises his brows and squints shrewdly at Bobby, who smiles. “Good night.”

He stops at the bathroom, then undresses and slides into bed next to a nude Dean, who greets him with the gentlest kiss Cas has ever received. “Want you, tesoro mio.”

Dean didn’t need to tell him, because he felt the raw vulnerability of his desire on his lips. “Anything you want, bello.”

Dean sweeps his lips across Cas’ cheeks, achingly slow, as if he intends to ruffle every tiny hair on his face. His careful exploration extends down, down, over the hills and valleys of his body, his mouth so whisper-light that every one of his follicles rises to meet it. When he pauses at Cas’ nipple, the touch is nearly as light, a barely-there flicking of the tongue that makes his body shiver. Even when he takes his penis in his mouth, the pace is unhurried, as if Dean is savoring him. The languid way Dean moves around his body, like Cas is his only priority for the rest of time, is breathtaking, so much so that when Dean cradles his head and traces his bottom lip with his tongue, he feels both lightheaded and lighthearted. The heaviness he’s carried around with him for most of his life is gone, as if he’s returned home from a long journey and dropped his bags down in the doorway. Home. Dean is his home. “I love you,” Cas whispers as Dean dips down for a kiss.

“I love you,” Dean smiles, soft and small. He seals their mouths together for several long minutes that still don’t feel like enough, then strokes him a few times with his hand before lifting himself onto Cas’ cock and sheathing it in one slow, steady motion. The way is already slick, and Cas knows he must have prepared himself in advance. Cas’ breath puffs shallowly from the top of his throat as he adjusts to the warmth and tightness of Dean surrounding him. “Tesoro mio, ti amo tanto. Sempre.”

“Dean,” Cas whines quietly. “Oh...Dean...oh.”

Castiel has no idea what he’s trying to say, or if he’s trying to say anything at all, but Dean seems to understand either way. They keep their thrusts gentle, bodies undulating like the sea, until Cas comes with a long, low moan from deep within. Moments later, cradled in Cas’ arms, Dean follows, his cry muffled against Cas’ heart.

“You’ll never be alone, either, Cas,” Dean whispers when their hearts and breathing have slowed. “Ti amo sempre. You’re my family.”

“And you are mine,” Cas whispers in return. He knows if he speaks any louder, his voice will break.

The following Wednesday, Cas readies Bobby for their outing at the gun range. He grins as Bobby chatters on about different weapons he used to shoot and his various marksman records. The man has been lit up from within all morning. He’s been exceptionally happy, really, the last several days. Getting his affairs in order seems to have settled something old and bothersome in him, and having Dean’s support meant the world to him. Sam coming around the next day to take him out to lunch, just the two of them, meant the world to him, too (to both of them, Cas suspects), and while Sam hasn’t fully accepted Bobby’s plans, he’s not harassing him about them, either.

“Awfully nice of your buddy to do this for us,” Bobby says yet again. He’s said it a few times. Cas isn’t sure if he keeps forgetting or if he’s just excited.

“It is. I’m grateful.”
What they’re doing is a bit unconventional. Bobby thinks his friend Jeremy is closing down the gun range to others while they’re there, which he is. Bobby also thinks that he’ll merely be sighting and telling Cas where to aim, but what he doesn’t know is that he will, in fact, be able to feel the gun in his hands, even if Cas will be supporting him and pulling the trigger. Strictly speaking, anyone with a gun in their hands is supposed to be able to control that gun themselves. Jeremy plans to turn the other way.

Dean and Sam are already in the parking lot talking when Cas and Bobby arrive. There are hugs and a kiss from Dean to Cas’ cheek, and then they’re inside. The smell of gunpowder and metal is strong and familiar, even if he hasn’t discharged a weapon in ages. It’s one of those things you don’t really forget. He can tell Bobby hasn’t forgotten, either.

Jeremy is a bear of a man, a bit overweight but packing solid muscle, too. He smiles and shakes Cas’ hand, then Dean’s and Sam’s, and salutes Bobby. It seems to endear him to the old man. He goes over the safety rules and has them sign paperwork, then lets them do their thing.

Donning protective ear and eyewear, the men ready themselves to shoot rifles. Everyone agrees that Bobby should go first. Cas hangs the target and sends it thirty yards down range, then turns to the group.

“Allright, Bobby, here’s how we’re going to do this,” Cas says. “Dean, Sam, come help me, please?”

Bobby and his boys give him the same confused look, one that makes it hard to believe they aren’t actually related. He positions Dean on one side of Bobby’s chair and Sam on the other, then places himself at Bobby’s shoulder. “Dean, you’re going to hold his left arm up. Sam, you’ll hold his right. Bobby, I’m going to hold one of your hands on the forestock, and the other on the handgrip. You tell us where to move, and when you’re ready, you tell me and I’ll help you lift your finger to press the trigger.”

Bobby’s lips tighten into a thin line as his breath puffs through his nose. He’s trying like hell not to cry. “Probably ain’t gonna work,” he mumbles.

“You might be right,” Cas retorts. “Or you might be wrong. But we won’t know until we try. I mean, you’re right a fair amount of the time, but you’re wrong a lot, too.”

“Oh, go to hell, son,” Bobby grumbles. “Let’s go.”

Cas glances at Dean, who’s smirking at him. Dean’s recognizing his tricks.

Cas loads the rifle, then positions it, the brothers on either side of their uncle. Bobby stares straight ahead at the targets. “When you’re ready, Bob. I’m going to breathe with you.”

He squints, then sights the target. “About an inch down,” he says. They make the adjustment. After another adjustment, Bobby focuses on the target and breathes steadily. Cas syncs his breathing with his. Finally, he says, “In five breaths,” which Cas understands. He releases the safety and positions Bobby’s finger on the trigger. On Bobby’s fifth exhale, Cas and Bobby squeeze the trigger.

The bullet flies down the lane and hits the target. Cas immediately takes control of the weapon, putting the safety back on and keeping the gun pointed down range. All three men—Bobby’s adopted sons—turn to him. “How are you?” Cas asks, though he doesn’t have to. Bobby’s joy fills the acrid air.

“Shit, that felt good,” Bobby hoots. Dean laughs, followed by Sam and then Cas, who can’t believe it actually worked. He had his doubts.
The rest of their time at the range is filled with the same sort of laughter—at themselves, at their mediocre results (except for Cas’), at the absurdity of life, and at the happiness that fills them. When it’s time to leave, Bobby and the Winchesters tip Jeremy outrageously well and chatter nonstop about the afternoon. They make their way to Sofia’s to meet up with the ladies, and Cas counts the day as a success.

When they arrive, they’re greeted by Charlie, Jo, Allie, and Ellen in the parking lot. Charlie immediately comes to Bobby and takes the handles of his chair, she and the rest of the women clamoring to hear all about his adventure. Allie greets Cas with her usual, mock formal greeting, and he reminds her that she’ll get to practice some Italian tonight, which makes her squeal in delight. Sam takes her hand as she bounces toward the restaurant. Dean has lingered behind. “C’mere, you,” he purrs before pressing Cas against the van and sliding his hands around his waist and his tongue inside his mouth. Cas inhales the smoky tang still clinging to Dean’s clothes as they kiss, neither in a hurry to get inside. “You are amazing,” Dean sighs, punctuating each word with a firm kiss. “That meant the world to him. To us.”

“I know. I was happy to do it.”

“And damn, you were hot in there. How do you say ‘my boyfriend is so fucking sexy’ in Italian?”

“I don’t know,” Cas laughs. “But thank you.”

“Thank you,” Dean says quietly, with a sincerity in his eyes that tells of a deeper gratitude.

The table is already rowdy when Cas and Dean arrive hand-in-hand. They’re surprised to see Giulia and Sofia sitting at the table as well, Giulia’s cousin Renata acting as the server and her brother Alessandro cooking tonight. They are both at the table as well. “Ren, Alex! It’s been a while,” Cas greets them. He offers hugs, then says, “This is—”

“Oh, we know,” Renata smiles. “Dean. We’ve heard all about your great love.”

She’s teasing him, but he doesn’t deny it because she’s right. They take the men’s appetizer orders and go back to work. Cas heads toward Sofia to ask her to switch with him so he can assist Bobby with his meal, but she shoos him away as she offers Bobby water. Dean raises his eyebrows and gives an approving nod as Cas settles next to him.

Dinner is lively, as it often is with these people. They drink wine and eat rich food and laugh. There is so much laughter and light as those around him talk about their days. Cas remembers that this is something he longed for once, something he never thought he’d have. He had a taste of it with Missouri’s family. He had another taste with Benji’s family. But this family, this is his family, a family that he chose because he wanted to, and a family that chose him because they, for some reason, wanted to as well. He turns to Dean and pulls his face to him, kissing him because he can, because his love will not be turned away, no matter his imperfections. They get wolf whistles and a piece of bread lobbed their way, and they keep kissing, though their laughter makes it difficult.

Their meals arrive, so they separate and the table quiets a bit as plates are placed before them. “This is what I want,” Bobby announces when Renata leaves and everyone has started tucking into their meals. “When I die. I want my memorial here. Now I ain’t plannin’ on keelin’ over anytime soon. I got a lotta life left in me. I wanna go shootin’ again, and I wanna go fishin’, and want our Sunday Fundays and I wanna spend time with all of ya. But when it’s my time, I want you all to be just like this, having a good time, because this makes me happy. I’ve always believed family don’t end in blood, and you all are livin’ proof of that. You’re my family, and I love ya. Alright, moment over. Let’s stuff our faces.”
The table erupts in cheers and laughs as they resume eating and talking. Cas looks around the table at each person—at Ellen, Giulia, and Sofia, who’ve been like mothers to him; at Bobby, who’s been like a father; at Charlie and Jo, who’ve been more like his annoying sisters than wives; at Allie and Sam, who’ve become like a niece and a brother to him; and to Dean, who’s...well. It may not be legal, but he knows what Dean is to him in his heart. “I love our family,” he whispers to Dean.

Dean turns to him, his eyes still wet from Bobby’s words. “Our famiglia,” he smiles. “You did this, you know. You made this family. If you hadn’t come along, chances are pretty damn good that Bobby and I would still be stuck in our rut. Or worse.” He glances over at Bobby, likely thinking of the cardiac arrest that may very well have taken his uncle’s life, then scans the people at the table. “A lot of things would be different, and none of them for the better.” Dean thumbs at Cas’ chin, then kisses it. “Ti amo, tesoro mio. You pushy bastard, you.”

Cas laughs through the warmth suffusing his entire being. “Ti amo, caro mio, you stubborn pain in the ass.” Their lips join and they kiss through the teasing groans and taunts of their family.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for the following:
Discussion of death, including planning and visiting a funeral home.

The final installment of Push/Pull, an epilogue, will be on Friday. Some have been concerned because I used the “Creator Chose Not to Use Archive Warnings” tag. If you are worried or concerned in any way, feel free to ask me about it on Twitter (@followuenergy). I wish there was a message option on AO3 (if there is, I don’t know it). But please know, I will always wrap you (and the end of my stories) in love!
❤
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Oh my goodness! The final chapter! As usual, heartfelt stuff at the end, and a preview of my next long fic, too. 😊

*Some tough stuff in this epilogue, so feel free to check out the warning at the end if you feel you need to. Just so you know, it will be a spoiler if you choose to read the end note. But do what’s best for you! ❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Five years later

“I think that’s everything,” Cas says, slamming the trunk of the Impala shut. Dean winces but doesn’t say anything about it. Cas respects Dean’s worship of the car, but doesn’t have the same obsession with it that Dean does. (“You fetishize the thing,” Cas told him once, to which he’d responded with a lame-ass “I’ll fetishize you” and Cas just raised his eyebrows and smirked. Not his best comeback, but it led to sex, so no complaints.)

“It oughta be. We both checked everything, like, five times.”

“Well, if we need something, we can always buy it. Come on.”

They already said their official goodbyes last night at the Roadhouse, everyone wishing them well and insisting they return safely with lots of tacky souvenirs. It’s early, so they decide they’ll wait until later to send their text that they’re out on the road. They slump into their seats, coffees in hand, and they settle in to leave Pennsylvania behind.

A month. They have a glorious month out on the road. They’ve never managed to take more than a week off at a time—never dared to, really—so the idea of an entire month, just the two of them, thrills Dean. He knows it thrills Cas, too. The plan is to head south to Maryland to catch up with a few friends Cas had while at Walter Reed, then to see the nation’s capital, since Dean’s never been. They’ll swoop through Virginia and Tennessee, cut across Arkansas, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, and end up in California. There they’ll visit several national parks before they cut back through the middle of the U.S., hitting South Dakota because they told Bobby they would, then up to Minnesota to catch a Twins game. They’ll stay in the Great Lakes area a few days before they head back home.

Each day they drive further from home is a day that brings more and more relaxation. Cas’ friends in Maryland are awesome, as funny as their friends back home. Cas always seems to draw out the best in people. He’s certainly brought out the best in Dean. It’s some sort of freaky gift he’s never taken for granted in all the years they’ve been together. Washington D.C. is cool, a stupidly busy city but filled with so much history that both of them nerd out over it and don’t worry about the hustle and bustle around them. In Tennessee, they have to stop to get Western garb. Cas looks ridiculously hot in his brown boots and a Stetson Monterey cowboy hat in a fawn color that makes his eyes seem brighter. Cas makes a lot of Brokeback jokes, but he seems to think Dean looks pretty hot, too, if his growl and his “leave the hat on” that night in bed are any indication.
In Texas, they stick out less for their hats and more for the fact that they’re two dudes who seem a little too close, but no one bothers them and they eat the best barbeque food Dean’s ever eaten anywhere. They also get to ride mechanical bulls, which is a hell of a lot harder than it looks on TV. Dean falls on his ass pretty quickly. Cas falls, too, but it takes him a lot longer. “I have previous experience,” he explains with a wink that sends heat racing through Dean’s spine as he remembers the first time Cas sat on him, on Christmas Eve several years ago at the Roadhouse. Cas has sat on him several times since, of course.

New Mexico is a cool experience. Dean’s happy because they get to keep wearing their hats without looking ridiculous, and Cas is happy because he feels “spiritually connected” there, which he didn’t know was a thing for Cas but whatever. Maybe Cas didn’t know, either. They both think it would be a place Charlie would love and Jo would pretend to hate but would love because Charlie loves it. There’s no traveling for them now, not with Charlie being pregnant. Cas gets a lot of razzing from his wives for finally knocking Charlie up, and though they spin dirty yarns about how it happened, everyone knows the truth of Cas’ donation and Charlie’s impregnation at a clinic, her wife by her side.

Temperatures are soaring in the West, and by the time they make it to California, they’re both ready for some cooler woodlands. “These are fuckin’ incredible, Cas,” Dean murmurs when they’re staring up at huge, ancient redwoods. “Make you feel pretty damn insignificant.”

“Indeed,” Cas says in his understated way, though he seems awed, too. He takes his hand. “Don’t ever doubt your significance to me, though.”

Dean smiles. Cas always claims he’s not romantic, and then he says things like that or does things like he did last night, drawing Dean a bath and filling it with fancy shit he got from a Native woman in New Mexico. “I don’t, sweetheart.” And he doesn’t, though he’s questioned it a few times, through his insecurity and the bumps in the road when things have been tough over the last few years. Unlike early in their relationship, though, Dean told him when he was feeling that way, or Cas guessed at it a lot earlier, and they pulled each other closer. It helped.

As they wind their way up the state, Dean wonders if Sam ever misses California. He’d been happy here, once, when he and Amelia were doing well. Amelia ended up being a piece of work, though. He still has his conflicts with her over Allie, though she’s mostly been out of the girl’s life by her own choice. But his bride Eileen is a steady comfort to him, an oasis. He’s never seen his brother more in love. It’s a gentle kind of love, a smooth, glassy lake compared to the sometimes wild currents of Dean and Cas’ love. It’s a perfect kind of love for his brother, a love Dean could never have fallen into. He’s too stubborn, seen too much, had to be too much. Cas has a steadfastness with an edge, one that rides Dean to the edge of his own discomfort, pushing him to grow, to change, to believe in himself. No gentle love would be enough. He needs Cas’ quiet intensity. And Cas needs his noisiness, his fire, as fireproof as he seems to be sometimes. They give balance to each other. It’s perfect for them, for who they are, for their lives.

Nevada and Utah pass by over a couple of days. They stop in Salt Lake City. It’s one of the most beautiful cities Dean’s ever seen, surrounded by mountains and the Great Salt Lake. The buildings are amazing, too. Dean doesn’t subscribe to the major religion in the area, but man, their followers know how to build some breathtaking stuff. They spend a day and overnight at Antelope Island State Park, on Great Salt Lake, hiking (as if they hadn’t done enough of that in California), kayaking, and swimming. Cas nearly loses his shit when they see bison during their hike; Dean has to chuckle at how cute he is, gushing as he takes pictures of all the wildlife they see. They visit the lake, despite the bit of odor it has, and Dean is surprised to find it really is salty, as the name suggests. He giggles like a child at how easily he floats on it.
Making it to South Dakota is bittersweet. Dean’s never been here, but he knows Bobby’s attachment to it. He asked him once if he wanted to visit, but Bobby didn’t think his body could take the travel and he didn’t want to be too far from home. Dean respected that. They ended up renting a wheelchair-accessible house on a lake close to home, where Bobby actually got a sunburn from all the time he spent outside fishing. Using addresses Bobby gave them, they find Bobby’s old business (a salvage yard), the house where he grew up, the park where he met Karen, and the house they lived in together after they married. They take lots of pictures.

“It’s so weird to look at these places and think of Bobby here,” Dean says as they share milkshakes in the park. “There’s a whole other life I was never part of.”

“Mmm. Well, we can’t know everything about everyone, I suppose.”

“Yeah. It’s weird, though. I mean, even thinking of him as a young guy. In my mind he was always as old as dirt.” Cas snorts. “You what I mean!”

“I know,” Cas says, and kisses his temple. Cas’ kisses never get old, will never get old, even when Cas is as old as dirt. “Imagine him sitting on this bench right here, wooing a young Karen, not even suspecting the love he’d eventually share with her.”

The thought makes Dean smile widely.

They spend the night at a hotel Bobby told them about, then make their way out of the state the next day so they can catch the Minnesota Twins play that night. They eat their weight in hot dogs, fries, and soda, and even though Cas has never stopped calling them the Twits, he cheers for them anyway.

Dean gets another one of his trip requests met when they stop in Chicago at Pequod’s just to have authentic deep-dish pizza. There’s a bar, but Dean can’t be bothered to care when his senses are focused on the pizza that’s set before him. The meat is hearty and the sauce tastes like fresh tomatoes—not too sweet—but the real star of the show is the crust, because the cheese on it is caramelized deliciousness. “Sorry, babe, but I’m dumping you so I can marry this pie,” Dean mumbles with a full mouth.

“Not if I marry it first,” Cas retorts with a smile and chipmunk cheeks.

The next day brings them to their home away from home for the next five days—a cabin along Lake Erie in Ohio. The spot they have is more secluded than most of the places along the lake, which is perfect for what they need—to be alone. Because after all this time, after all they’ve been through together, there’s nothing Dean wants to do more than make the love of his life holler until he’s hoarse.

“You...are mine. All mine,” Dean growls in his sweetheart’s ear as soon as they get their things in the cabin.

“You think so, hmm?”

“I know so.”

“You’re right,” Castiel smiles, surging forward and digging his fingers into Dean’s hair as he slams him against the nearest surface (some sort of cabinet). Dean tugs him forward and kisses him, hard and needy, and they moan into each other’s mouths as they ruck up each other’s sweaty t-shirts. “Mmm, fuck, Dean, want you. Make me lose it,” Cas whines, and it lights Dean up from the inside. They’ve worked on this a long time, the trust that it takes to really let go. He’s never been so himself
with anyone else—he was always so busy being what others needed that he could never risk them seeing what he actually was or what he really wanted, and he figured it would probably bite him in the ass if he did—and he knows Cas was the same. Was.

“Mmm, you trust me to give you what you need, hmm? Know I’ll give you anything you want, know you can go crazy with me?” Dean purrs as he bites Cas’ ear. He doesn’t really need to ask these things, but it turns him on when Cas says “yes,” so he likes to. When he gets the affirmation he’s looking for, he draws Cas toward the bedroom.

The bed squeaks when they bounce onto it, but the mattress seems comfortable enough. “Can I tie you?” Dean asks. With another affirmation received, Dean pulls out the bag they packed with their playtime goodies and draws out the silky red fabric. He secures Cas’ wrists together comfortably, then ties them to the scrolled metal headboard. They don’t really need the ties—Cas would hold still if Dean asked him to—but they’re a good reminder to truly “let go and let Dean,” as they like to say (or, the alternative, “let go and let Cas”). Dean then pulls another sash from the bag. “May I?” he asks, then ties it around Cas’ eyes when he receives permission.

Cas is beautiful like this—fully trusting, fully vulnerable, fully in the moment because they have no one and nothing to distract them. They need this. It’s been too long since they’ve had each other this way. “Ti amo, Cas,” Dean whispers before planting a kiss onto his lips. They kiss deeply for a long time, until Dean sits up and explores his lover’s body with careful hands. The humid June air pervading the room does nothing to stop the shivers from Cas’ body whenever Dean glides across the tanned surface. When he thinks Cas has grown too used to his touch, he switches to his lips, then his tongue. Cas’ long exhale fills the space between them, more lush and precious than anything they’ve seen this trip. His body is lax, open and accepting of Dean’s affection. It still amazes him that Cas loves him this way, trusts him this way.

Dean opens him up carefully, since it’s been a while. On this trip, when they’ve joined this way, it’s been Cas opening Dean up and filling him, because that’s what Dean needed. But now Dean feels like he can give him this gift in return, one he probably doesn’t realize he needs but Dean does. When he’s pleading with Dean to fill him, Dean kisses him and begins to position himself. “Wait,” Cas says. “Tie us together.”

It’s another thing they do, one that Dean, in an introspective moment, finally figured out. Every so often, they’ll tie a part of themselves together—usually wrists, but sometimes waists, ankles, or chests. It’s a physical manifestation of their bond—We are vulnerable together, we are connected—and though occasionally it’s tricky logistically, it always makes them feel closer. Dean smiles and, without a word, unties Cas’ wrists from the headboard. He loosens the binding, then slides a hand through between Cas’ and feels Cas’ hands envelop him. He coats both his and his lover’s dripping cocks with lube, then slides into his body, watching Cas the entire time. When Cas has adjusted, he raises the blindfold, then slips his other hand into the binding.

Dean’s body slides into and over Cas’, their rhythm familiar yet exciting. He roams over Cas’ face, dropping kisses when the tenderness becomes too much. When Cas peaks, it’s with Dean’s name on his breath. When Dean comes, it’s staring into the eyes that saw in him what no one else did and what no one else will.

“Well, that was completely expected,” Cas says with a lazy, sated grin. He presses a kiss onto Dean’s glabella.

“Am I that predictable?”

“We’re at a cabin with no one around. If you hadn’t jumped me, I would’ve jumped you.”
“So romantic,” Dean smiles, because despite his jocular remark, he knows the sap is going to do something romantic before they leave this cabin. However, he’s going to beat him to it. “Be right back.” He cleans up and tosses a fresh cloth to Cas, then pads into the kitchen to fetch the surprise he grabbed when they stopped at the supermarket on their way up. He walks carefully back to the bedroom.

“Dean,” Cas smiles.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart,” he says as he presents Cas with a giant piece of cake still in its flimsy plastic container, a candle nestled into the frosting. Cas doesn’t avoid celebrating his birthday anymore. They leave room in the day to remember his mom, but mostly it’s become a day of quiet contentment. “Just one candle on here, to remind you of your one year left before turning fifty.”

“Aww, fuck you very much, caro.”

Dean grins. “You’re welcome.”

Cas blows out the candle and they share a fork to eat it.

The rest of their days at the cabin are spent making love both tenderly and with abandon, taking advantage of the isolation of their location to indeed make each other holler (and, though neither would admit it to anyone else, cry). When they’re not busy getting busy, they’re sleeping, eating, swimming, or fishing. It’s the fishing that makes them think of Bobby.

“Remember the last time we took him fishing?” Dean asks Cas.

“You mean how you and Charlie cannonballed into the water and splashed us? Yes, I remember.”

Dean has to bring it up every so often, just so he can relive the look of indignation on Cas’ face.

They’d love to stay beyond the five days they allotted themselves, but it’s been nearly a month and they need to get home. Reluctantly, they pack up the Impala and make their way.

Crossing into Pennsylvania, they grow quieter. Soon it’ll be back to their lives. That means a lot of things—most of them really, really good. “You wanna eat takeout with Bobby when we get back?”

“Sounds good.”

They stop at their favorite pizza place and grab sodas and a pie (though now he’ll always compare it to the Chicago stuff). It’s a warm day, perfect for eating outside.

“Hey, Bobby, hey, Aunt Karen,” Dean says to the bronze grave markers. Cas gives a similar greeting as he places the pizza box on a blanket from the car.

Death came, as it always does. For Bobby, it came three months ago, just a couple of months before they left for their trip. Three years ago he had a small stroke. After that, he insisted that Dean and Cas plan this trip. “You’ll need it,” he reasoned. He got excited planning it with them, mapping out stops along the way and giving Dean shit about feeding his cowboy obsession out West (he’ll never forget his uncle teasing him about “knocking boots—literally” and how Cas laughed and vowed to buy assless chaps, and then how they tried to top each other with the most ridiculously kinky cowboy-themed jokes they could think of, all while Dean blushed hard as he tried to hide his arousal). It was important to Bobby that they do this after he passed, and it was important to them, too. They would need the rest, the time to be together to recover. After Bobby’s second stroke a year ago, he developed aphasia and dysphagia, and he needed continuous nursing care. It was taxing on Cas—on both of them, but especially him—but he never wanted to put him in a nursing facility unless they
couldn’t manage him at home anymore. It meant the world to Dean that he was so committed to Bobby, even when it was difficult (though he wasn’t surprised—this was Cas, after all). They worked extra hard on their relationship then, and their friends and family pitched in, as well as another nurse who they hired to help with Bobby’s care. His third stroke happened in his sleep, and Cas found him in the morning. Dean will never forget how Cas returned to their room, stripped his clothes off, and climbed back into bed, taking Dean into his arms. “He’s free,” Cas whispered, and they wrapped their limbs around each other and cried until they felt ready to handle the painful day together.

“So we went to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” Dean says to Bobby. “It was friggin’ amazing, man. You were right. Went to Arlington, saw the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. That was...wow. So dignified and respectful. I’ll never forget it.”

“And Dean _did_ get his cowboy hat,” Cas smiles, nudging Dean’s elbow.

“Yeah, yeah, but Cas did, too!”

“For you.”

“Still.”

“And Bobby, you’ll be glad to know we knocked boots so hard they came off.”

“Dude, don’t tell him that!”

Cas merely smiles and takes a bite of pizza.

“Ugh, anyway, so yeah. The Southwest was cool. Cas made friends. These people knew he was a nurse just by looking at him.”

“They knew I was a healer.”

“Whatever, yeah. And Bobby, man, I wish you could’ve seen California. We went to this one place where you could drive _through_ a tree, the thing was so fuckin’ huge. They had a ton of places where you could’ve gone with your chair. Tons of animals, too—”

“You should’ve seen the bison in Utah, Bobby,” Cas interjects.

“Yeah, Cas went all gaga over ‘em. And we brought you to South Dakota.” At this, Dean’s eyes water. He misses the old guy sometimes. Cas reaches over and squeezes his knee. Dean pulls out the small, empty brass box they used to carry a portion of Bobby’s ashes as they traveled and clutches it in his fist. “We took you to your houses, and the salvage yard, and the park, and we left a little bit of you in each place. And we took you to a Twins game.”

“I even cheered for the Twits for you,” Cas smiles, his voice tight with tears.

“He did. Nearly killed him, but he did it. And they won. And we went to that cabin in Ohio, that one you took Aunt Karen to the last vacation you guys had together. Remember that, Aunt Karen?”

Dean sniffs and wipes his eyes with the back of the hand holding the box. “Yeah. You were right. It was a great place. And we took you fishing one more time before we let you go on the lake.” He crumbles, and he’s grateful that Cas scoops him up and holds him close. He knows this would’ve been so much worse without Cas in his life, for so many reasons.

“We love you and we miss you, Bobby,” Cas says after they kiss the tears off each other’s faces. He pats the ground. “Oh, I guess we need to tell you one more thing.” He looks down at his hand, then
at Dean’s.

“Oh yeah,” Dean laughs. “We, uh…” He glances and Cas and smiles goofily. “Yeah. We’re wearin’ your wedding rings, you guys. It’s not, like, legal, but it doesn’t have to be, you know? We said the vows years ago, anyway.” Dean remembers finding the identical, plain gold bands when they were going through Bobby’s things. He’d turned to Cas with them in hand and asked if he wanted to wear one. They got them resized the same day, and that afternoon they exchanged them in the backyard along with the vows they’d already exchanged years before in Dean’s office after the whole Benjamin thing. “Cas is wearing Aunt Karen’s because he has delicate fingers.”

“That’s not what you said about them last night.”

“Eww, don’t tell them that!”

“That’s a little more than I need to know about any a ya,” Cas comments gruffly, mimicking Bobby from the day long ago when they had lunch at the Roadhouse for the first time and Dean thought he was being asked for a foursome. They laugh hard, warm and happy at the memory.

Dean adds when they’ve calmed, “Something else too. We, um…well…” Cas slings his arm around his shoulders and pulls him into a hug. Dean does the same and draws a breath. “Cas and I are Singers now. Both of us had our names changed. That we did do legally,” he chuckles. “We, um…well, it just felt right.”

“It did,” Cas confirms with a gentle peck to Dean’s cheek.

They sit a bit longer, finishing their pizza and telling Bobby and Karen about the little details of their trip. When they’re done, they clean up and pat the grave markers. “See you later,” Dean whispers.

They have tacky souvenirs to distribute, so the next night they gather at Sofia’s. It’s the first time they’re all there since Bobby’s memorial, though they met up at the Roadhouse—Giulia and Sofia included—a couple of times.

“There they are!” Giulia gushes when they arrive, soaked from the rain pummeling the area. “Come in where it’s warm and dry, come on!”

They stand for a few minutes, giving hugs to everyone but Allie, who’s at a sleepover, then they sit and order dinner. Everyone is lively and enthusiastic about their trip. When talk turns to Bobby, there are smiles all around, though Dean doesn’t miss the brief flares of sadness.

When dessert comes, they distribute gifts to everyone. They’re mugs, which the men thought especially funny when thinking back to how mugs and water bottles were the only drinking vessels Bobby and Dean had at one time. The mugs are the most ridiculous ones they could find, with ugly cartoon cacti or sayings such as “There’s no Utah without U!” Renata brings them a bottle of wine and Cas fills everyone’s pre-washed cups (except for Charlie’s, which gets filled with water). “To Bobby,” Cas toasts.

“To Bobby!” their friends and family shout raucously. Dean’s pretty sure Bobby heard them.

“Hey, thanks for the cup, perv,” Jo snipes, smacking Cas’ arm. Cas couldn’t resist the “Fiddle me in Tennessee” mug for her. Despite her put-upon disgust, she proceeds to tell him the latest dirty joke she heard.

“Hey, you never did tell me that joke you were gonna tell me,” Dean mentions to Cas when he has his attention again.
“What joke?”

“How we met. The cunnilingus one.”

Charlie overhears and pipes up, “Oh! Mom’s favorite! Tell it, Cas!”

“I can’t believe you remembered that,” he says to Dean. He turns toward Eileen so that she can read his lips and Sam can hear him to interpret. “Okay. So there’s a proper Southern woman of a certain age who’s getting married for the fourth time. At the bridal salon, she insists on a white dress. The dressmaker looks at her and says, ‘You can’t wear white. You’ve been married three times already.’ She looks right at him and says, ‘Oh, honey, I’ve been married three times, but I’m still a virgin.’”

Cas vocalizes the dressmaker and the bride in Southern accents and it’s already making Dean laugh. “So the dressmaker says, ‘Married three times and still a virgin? How is that possible?’ and she says, ‘Well, my first husband was a gynecologist, and all he wanted to do was look at it. My second husband was a psychologist, and all he wanted to do was talk about it. And my third husband was a stamp collector.’” Cas pauses and looks skyward with a dreamy look on his face, then grins slyly at the group as he says, “Mmm, I’m gonna miss him.”

The table erupts in raucous laughter. “I still love that one, hubby!” Charlie cries as she clinks mugs with him. Eileen declares she’s stealing the joke, Giulia thanks him for reminding her of it, Sofia shakes her head in reluctant amusement, and everyone else is busy laughing and chattering. Dean smiles at his family, the people who have made his life bigger and better in every way, the people who are in his life thanks to Cas, the man who pushed him to want bigger and better things for himself, the man Dean had to pull along when he tried to deny himself the same.

“I love that one, too, hubby,” he murmurs with a grin at Cas, who smiles back softly. He loops his arms around Cas’ neck. “Ti amo sempre, tesoro mio. Mio marito.”

“Dean,” he blushes, even after all these years.

“There’s my Snugli.”

“Stop it,” Cas chides with a huff of laughter. “Ti amo sempre, mio caro marito.”

And just as they have many times over, and just as they will many times again through the push/pull of life, Dean and Castiel Singer kiss amidst the love and laughter of their family.

Chapter End Notes

*Warning for: discussion of character death (because this is an epilogue, it is discussed as a past event).

Oh my! Another journey we’ve completed together. This has been a labor of love. I got more writer’s block on this one than any other, I think. As I mentioned at the beginning, Bobby’s condition was based on my mom’s, and throughout the writing of this fic I’ve been caring for both of my parents in different ways. I love to write, so it has been a great outlet for me. Many of you mentioned caring for a loved one, too. I hope this has brought you some sense of camaraderie, validation, or escape. ❤ I have adored this story, and I adore all of you. Thank you for sharing this walk with me!

With SPN ending next year, some have asked if I will continue writing. I have a ton of
ideas, so as long as I’m able and it feeds my soul, I certainly will. I may be writing to
myself, lol, but I have a feeling this fandom will continue for a long time, so I’m not
worried.

I’m on Twitter and Tumblr and I’m inconsistent on both, but feel free to connect with
me.

And finally...a new fic, coming your way soon! I may throw in a short little something
while we wait to start our next adventure, but here is a preview of my next fic:

Adventures in Love and Grieving

Dean Winchester is grieving alone, and he’s fine with that. He doesn’t need to “talk”
about his “feelings.” But his brother Sam and the rest of his family are “concerned,” so
when his brother brings him a flyer for a different kind of grief group, he reluctantly
agrees to go. There he meets a kickass bunch of grievers, including Castiel Novak, the
co-founder, who’s channeled his grief into the group and into a popular Instagram page,
Adventures in Grieving. Sharing food, art, and a similar loss, they develop a profound
bond that eventually leads them to question what they thought they knew about
themselves—and leads to the greatest adventure of all.

So, ready for an adventure? ❤️ ❤️ ❤️

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