the heart of the matter

by shannie541

Summary

Dean Winchester returns to Lawrence High School after an unexpected (for everyone else) leave of absence due to a 'family emergency'. Thanks to his meddling friends, he meets and falls for Castiel Milton hard and fast.

When that 'family emergency' turns out to be a major health crisis for the elder Winchester, friends and family rally around him and re-evaluate what's important in all of their lives and Dean works to keep his head above water.

This is all Destiel all the time. Any other pairing (Sam/Jess, Gabe/Kali, etc.) are secondary and on the periphery.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Dean adjusted the wool scarf around his neck as the chill, crisp air of winter in Kansas stirred. He pulled his bookbag smoothly over one shoulder before closing the door to the Impala and turning to face the Lawrence High School and walking towards the doors.

Attending Lawrence High School is a peculiar experience, Castiel notes; much different than the private boarding school he’d called home just a few short months ago. The differences are glaringly obvious, he decides, standing at his locker when he sees his cousin Gabriel approach from the corner of his eye. He turns to fully face him, only to see his mouth twisted in its usual grin and an arm thrown around the shoulders of a green-eyed boy blushing a curious shade of red, but grinning as well.

“Cassy!” Gabriel bellows. His voice seems to boom in the hallway, quieted and filled with grim and stone-faced students undoubtedly made miserable at the shortness of their winter break. Castiel’s grits his teeth at the dreaded nickname that Gabriel refuses to let die and his swear is drowned out at the sound of slammed locker doors.

When Gabriel is within reach, Castiel steps close – in his space, something he knows Gabriel hates. “Please do not call me that. Especially not here.” Gabriel’s golden eyes flicker mischievously and the boy, still trapped under Gabriel’s arm despite being taller than them both, snickers to himself.

“Well,” Gabriel begins, slapping his open hand against his chest dramatically, “excuuuse me for being happy to see you.”

Castiel rolls his eyes and huffs a breath. “You saw me this morning when we drove to school together.”

“Yeah, well…” Gabriel releases his hold on the other boy and shrugs, “maybe I just missed your pretty little face.” Castiel rolls his eyes again but Gabriel pointedly ignores him, turning towards the other boy. “Dean Winchester,” he begins, gesturing at the other boy – Dean – like a game show host, “meet my cousin Cassy, er, Castiel Milton. My apologies. Castiel, this is my friend Dean.”

Dean tips his head in a nod of greeting and Castiel returns the gesture before speaking. “I don’t believe I’ve seen you around here before break.” He knows this immediately when Dean stares at him. He’d never forget eyes that green. “Are you new here?”

Dean huffs a small laugh, but there is no happiness in the sound. “Uh, no. Born and bred here in Lawrence.”

“Oh? Did you transfer from another school?” Castiel knows his curiosity is bordering on intrusiveness, but he speaks before he can control his own tongue.

Gabriel chirps up with a response before Dean can successfully blink away the surprise that colors his face. “Nope! Our pal Dean-o here just magically disappeared, what was it? Last March? April?”
“Christ, Gabe. I thought we went over this already.”

Gabriel shrugs. “Well, it’s been a while. Refresh my memory."

It’s Dean’s turn to roll his eyes now and Castiel notes fondly that Dean seems to have practiced patience for Gabriel and his seemingly unmatched level of energy, even at 7:30 in the morning. Castiel isn’t easily impressed, a jadedness his learned with a life spent around the rich and the shameless, but the purity of Dean’s green eyes and the sea of freckles over his nose is working overtime to chip away at that. He turns and faces Castiel when he speaks, all but ignoring Gabriel’s pout at his side. “I had a family emergency down in Wichita last year. It took up a lot of time.”

“Sure as hell did,” Gabe mutters. “But little Sammy was still here, if I recall correctly. And I do.”

‘Little Sammy’?” Castiel echoes. “Who is that?”

“My kid brother,” he starts, craning his neck to look around the hallway. “He beat me here this morning – some stupid club meeting or something. He should be around here somewhere. Ah! There, “he points, “the kid with the stupid hair.” Castiel turns in the direction of Dean’s outstretched finger and watches as a boy, who does not fit the moniker of ‘little’ anything talk animatedly to a girl with a head full of blonde curls.

“He is…not little.”

Dean barks a laugh and Gabriel snickers beside him. “No, he’s not. He’s only, like, a year younger than me so… Anyway, he stayed around with my uncle while my Dad and I spent some time in Wichita.”

“Doing God-knows-what because you sure as hell won’t tell me.”

“Gabe…”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll let it drop. For now, I guess. Anyhow, Dean-o, what’s your first class?” Gabriel seems remarkably unfazed by the intensity of Dean’s gaze and Castiel has to wonder how close the two of them are to be so comfortable around each other even with Gabriel’s tiresome… personality quirks.

“You asked me that not even ten minutes ago at my locker.”

“My, oh, my. I guess my mind my really be going in my old age. Be a dear and remind me again, will you?”

“Physics. With Henrickson.”

“Oh.” Castiel remarks with surprise and blinks at Dean and Gabriel’s twin raised eyebrows. “I believe we are in the same class, then.”

“What a funny little coincidence! My genius little cousin in a class with my genius dear old friend. I think we’ve all got the same lunch period, too.” Dean flashes Castiel a small smile as the bell rings.

Traffic in the hallway begins to move as students trudge to their first class of the new year, sleepiness or annoyance etched on their faces and shoulders slumped dejectedly. Dean’s eyes flick from Castiel, who feels himself finally exhale from under Dean’s green eyes, to his brother who walks toward them with the blonde girl’s arm wrapped securely around his waist. His smirk is so
playful that it rivals even Gabe’s. “Yo, Sammy!” he calls. Sammy stops and exhales an annoyed huff.

“Dean…”

Dean laughs. “Right. Sam. My bad. Look, you’re gonna either have to find your own way home from school or hang around and wait for me. I gotta meeting with Chuck at the end of the day.”

Sam squints at his brother. “I don’t think Mr. Shurley would appreciate you calling him that.”

Dean shrugs a flannel-clad shoulder. “What can I say? We’ve bonded.” At that, Sam shakes his head in amusement.

Beside him, the blonde girl looks up and between brothers. “Hey, Dean.”

“Howdy, Jess,” he says with a wink. “Lookin’ especially gorgeous today.”

Sam attempts to stare daggers at his brother but is ignored as Jess only laughs beside him. “Sam, if you need a ride home, I can give you a lift,” and Sam nods shyly.

Dean raises an eyebrow. “Don’t do anything I wo—“ Sam nudges Dean’s shoulder, much to Dean’s mock offense, before he and Jess walk away.

“Jesus, Dean. It’s only the first day back. What the hell did you do to wind up with an appointment with Shurley?”

“He, uh, I guess he wants to make sure I haven’t fallen behind.” He shrugs and rubs his neck nervously and Castiel finds the gesture oddly enduring. “Guess I’ll find out after school.” He turns back to Castiel, who draws himself up under his gaze. “Wanna walk to class together?”

“Uhm. Sure.” Castiel gives a small smile of his own and ignores Gabriel’s snickers as he and Dean head off in the direction of Henrickson’s AP Physics.

“Your cousin, huh?” Dean says when they are out of Gabriel’s range. Castiel nods an affirmative. “Your family gatherings must be interesting with him around, Cas.”

“To say the least. You have no idea. Christmas was…a shit show.” Castiel emphatically ignores the flutter in the pit of his stomach that Dean’s nickname and laugh causes.

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The first physics class of the semester is as uneventful as one would expect. Dean stares at the chalk board and scribbles notes but finds his mind wandering to the blue-eyed boy with the messy hair and ridiculous trench coat. Cas, Castiel, is sitting in the desk next to him and Dean has to try his damndest to not spend the entire class staring and resisting the urge to reach out and touch. Instead, his hand wanders subconsciously to his own chest, where he rubs a palm against his sternum at an imaginary itch. Henrickson notices the tick before Dean does, who promptly allows
his hand to fall in his lap at his raised eyebrow. *Fuck.*

When class is over, Dean tries (although he would beat the shit out of anyone who calls him out on it) to keep in time with Cas, *Castiel*, as they pack their belongings away, hoping to walk to his next class in his company. His plan, however, is shot straight to hell when he notices a tall figure looming over his desk. He looks up from his bookbag on the floor to see Henrickson standing there with his arms crossed expectantly over his chest. Dean swears internally and gives Castiel a wink before Henrickson has a chance to speak. “May I see you at my desk, Mr. Winchester?”

“Sure.”

“Finish packing up quickly, unless you want to be late to your next class.”

When Castiel is gone and the classroom is empty, with the exception of the two of them, Dean walks nervously up to Henrickson’s desk. He knows what’s coming.

*How are you?*

*Is everything alright?*

*If you’re feeling overwhelmed…*

It the same series of lectures that he’d gotten when he met with his teachers over break to turn in the last of the work he’d missed by being away. It’s a tiresome loop of vaguely concerned questions and pitying stares that make his heart speed up in his chest. He takes a steadying breath and waits.

“I’m glad to see you changed your mind about taking this class, Mr. Winchester.” Henrickson begins, not looking up from a stack of papers on his desk. Dean recognizes them and his scribbled writing sprawled across the pages. It’s the work he’d turned in two weeks ago; extra, *extra* assignments that Henrickson had given him because the guy’s a power-hungry douchebag that likes to see Dean squirm. Bastard. Dean hums in acknowledgement. “I mean it, Mr. Winchester. You have a great mind for this sort of thing.”

“Uh. I—thanks?”

“Don’t thank me, Dean. Those extra assignments? That was college-level work. I have a friend down at the university and asked him to send some things that he gives his students. He’s an engineering professor and was extremely impressed.”

“Are you shitting me? Uhm, I mean…shit.”

Henrickson laughs at this, stands, and comes around his desk to stand next to Dean. “It’s fine. Have you thought about your options for when you graduate? I know you’ve had a lot going on when most of your peers are cramming for the SAT or their college essays, but you have a great deal of potential. It’d be a shame to let it go to waste.”

“Actually, I, uh, took the ACT a few weeks before…everything.”
“And?”

“35.” Dean mutters.

“What was that?”

“I scored a 35.”

“Dean! That’s fantastic. With test scores like that and the quality of work you’ve been turning in with everything you’ve dealt with recently, you could get into any college you want.” At Dean’s silence, Henrickson places a hand on his shoulder and continues. “You do know that, right?”

“I. I hadn’t thought about it, really.”

“Well you should. Given your extenuating circumstances, I don’t think submitting a late application would shut you out of the running. Think about it, Dean. And if you need a letter of recommendation letter for Kansas State or Harvard or wherever, don’t hesitate to ask. I mean it. Despite what you may think, I actually kinda like you, kid.” Whatever expression is on Dean’s face brings another laugh out of Henrickson, who quickly scribbles a note down for him as the bell for second period rings. “Have a good semester, Dean. You deserve it.”

Dean walks out of his Physics class with Henrickson’s note jammed into his pocket and his words a pulsing replay in his head.

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Castiel’s day until lunch drags on so slowly that it’s almost painful. In several failed attempts of gaining any ounce of self-control, he wills himself to not watch the clock tick by, if only to preserve his sanity. He fails more than he succeeds, however, and finds himself slumping further and further into his seat when he sees just how slowly 60 seconds can drag on and on and on.

In the mess of frenzied teenagers breezing by to class and slamming locker doors and shouting teachers, Castiel catches sight of Dean Winchester at least three more times and he stops himself from approaching the first two times when he notices the thin line carved neatly between his brows and the tension in his shoulders. The last time, he’s listening to a petite blonde chatter and chirp in his ear with their arms linked. Castiel swallows and does his best to resist the hot flash of jealousy that flares through him.

Lunch comes at last and Castiel finds himself sitting at a table, listening to Gabriel prattle on and on and about Kali, a girl who attends Castiel’s former private where he (regrettably) “introduced” her to Gabriel. His attention is drawn back to the story by Gabriel’s wild gestures and exclamations at how heartbroken he is.

“-and she’s just…fuck. I don’t even know! She just keeps busting my balls and…I think I like it. Is that weird?”
“Gabriel. She’s broken up with you four times. Four. In the last three months.”

“But she keeps coming back, though. Just like I know she’s gonna do this time. I mean, with charm and a body like this,” he gestures at himself, “she won’t be able to stay away long.”

Castiel nods. “Kali could eat you alive.”

“I know, okay! Cassy. You’re killing me here.” He throws his arms up in a dramatic flourish of defeat.

“Gabe, be careful!” a voice calls. Castiel looks up behind Gabriel to see Sam Winchester jerking backwards with a tray of food in his hands that Gabriel nearly knocked to the floor. At his side is the petite blonde that was talking to Dean earlier. He tenses and forces himself to stuff another bite of mystery meat in his mouth.

“Sorry, Sam.”

“It’s cool. Mind if we join you guys?”

“Nope. The more the merrier! Speaking of, where’s that brother of yours?”

Sam shrugs. “I haven’t seen him this morning.” Castiel watches from the corner of his eye as Sam brushes his bangs back away from his face and smirks at the memory from earlier: the kid with the stupid haircut.

“What’s so funny, Cassy?”

“Cassy?” Sam and the blonde girl echo while Castiel growls Gabriel’s name.

“Hey,” the girl speaks up. “I’ve seen you around. Name’s Jo.” She extends a hand and Castiel tentatively extends his own and they shake. He’s almost surprised by the strength of her grip.

“Castiel.”

“I’m Sam. You were with Dean and Gabe this morning, right?”

“Yes. Gabriel was just introducing us.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“Dear, littlest Winchester. When are you gonna spill the beans and tell us where Dean’s been all this time? On the run? Prison?”

Sam swallows a bite of salad before running a hand through his hair in another failed attempt at controlling his bangs. “One,” he begins, holding up an index finger, “I am not the ‘littlest Winchester’ and I haven’t been since I turned 15. That’s all Dean. And two, he’s right behind you, dorkface. Why don’t you ask him?”

Castiel looks up at Sam’s words and there is Dean, standing right behind Gabriel with a triumphant smirk panted across his lips. In one hand, he balances a tray of mystery meat and there’s a fifth chair in his other hand that he’s dragging over to the table. “Move it, Gabe.” Gabriel dramatically rolls his eyes before sliding a chair closer to Sam so that Dean can sit between him and Castiel. If he notices the exchanged looks between Jo, Sam, and Gabriel, he chooses to ignore it and Castiel does the same. “Hey, Cas,” Dean smiles and Castiel swallows. “And Sammy, out of the two of us, you’re the ‘littlest Winchester’ in every way that matters.”
All talk of Dean’s absence die when he joins the group and diverts the conversation to lighter fare. Castiel notices quickly how the mood changes when Dean becomes an addition to the group – how much lighter the air becomes. The banter between him and Sam is amusing and good-spirited in a way it tends to be between siblings so close and Jo fits into the puzzle like a sister. When he realizes that, the coldness he felt towards her washes away and he simply relaxes in the comfort of Dean’s laughter and Gabriel’s familiar taunts.

Dean leaves before lunch is over, saying he wants to get to Mrs. Mosley’s AP English Lit class on time or that she’ll ‘beat me with a wooden spoon.’ Castiel stands to throw his trash away only to feel a small hand grab his arm. He turns to see Jo, Sam, and Gabriel all smiling goofily at him and blushes.

He asks, “Is there something on my face?” to which Gabriel snickers. The assbutt.

Jo places her chin in her hand and smiles fondly and Castiel feels the blush creep from his cheeks to his ears at the gesture. “Someone is sprung,” she announces.

“What?”

“You. Are. Sprung.” At that, Castiel decides he hates her again.

“Told ya, Sammy.” Gabriel says and victoriously folds his arms over his chest and Castiel resists the urge to chuck his plastic cafeteria tray at his head. “I should’ve bet money on it.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you three are talking about.”

“Is that why you just spent the entire lunch period staring at Dean like a love-sick Disney princess?”

Sam and Jo laugh and Castiel’s grip tightens on his tray but he can feel his self-control wavering. “Look, Castiel. Or, wait, didn’t my brother call you Cas earlier?”

“You are correct, Samuel! Already with the pet names. Isn’t it cute?”

“Shut up, Gabriel.” Castiel growls.

Sam tries desperately to hide a snicker behind a hand before continuing. “Our friend Charlie is having a get together at her house tonight. It’s nothing crazy, just a few movies or a video game or something for her and Dean to geek out over. You should come. Really. Gabe’ll be there. I know my brother better than anybody and he’ll be glad you came.”

The tension bleeds away from Castiel so fast that when he catches Jo’s eye again, she’s smiling sweetly at him like she can feel the flutter of hope in his chest, too. “Sure,” he nods. “I’d like that.”

“Great! Well, I gotta get going. Gabe knows Charlie’s address.”

“I should get going, too. Gotta change for gym.”

“Later, Sam. Jo.” Gabriel says as he stands. They smile and wave and Gabriel places a warm hand on Castiel’s shoulder. “I knew you and Dean-o would get on. He’s a good guy. Now come on. Be a gentleman and walk me to Spanish.”

Castiel turns to finally throw out his trash and smiles a small smile to himself.
Dean sits in one of the hard plastic chairs outside of Chuck’s office twitching nervously, humming Metallica to himself. The secretary glares over the rim of her glasses at him. He quiets instantly, flashing his most charming smile and continues to drum out of the rest of the song on his knee.

Chuck finally emerges from his office looking as hopped up on caffeine as always and gestures for Dean to follow him. The seat in front of Chuck’s desk is plush and comfortable, a major step up from the chairs in the main office and he finds himself relaxing a bit into the polyester cushion (sue him if he knows what polyester looks like from marathoning Project Runway. He spent a lot of time laid up out of school and Heidi Klum is hot). Chuck fiddles at his desk and all but inhales a cup of coffee while his eyes flick from the mess of papers spread out across his desk.

“Should I come back at a better time?” Dean asks. Chuck blinks up at him like he forgot Dean was even sitting there and Dean has to resist the urge to roll his eyes at the man. How such a space case got to be principal is a wonder to him.

“Oh. Sorry. Just…wanted to make sure I got everything right, y’know? There’s a lot of stuff here. You’ve been away for a good while, Dean. I was surprised you managed to stay so caught up.”

He pauses and frowns at a piece of paper with what looks suspiciously like a coffee stain on it before continuing. “Actually, it looks like you’re ahead.”

Dean would be offended at how shocked Chuck seems by that, but he’d be surprised too if it happened to anybody but him. “Yeah. I had a lot of free time.”

“Don’t downplay it, Dean. You were – “

“I know, Chuck. I was there, remember?”

Chuck nods. “Right. You know, you’re my only student that calls me that.”

“Huh. Guess that makes me special, then.”

“Yeah, yeah. Keep telling yourself that, kid.”

“Is this all you wanted from me? I want to get started on some homework.”

“Stop lying. You’re just gonna blast that awful rock music in that space ship you call a car.”

“Don’t insult Baby.”

“Right. My bad.” Chuck clears his throat and eyes Dean, who fidgets under his stare. “You’re looking better. That’s all I really wanted to talk about – to see how you were doing and adjusting to being back. I know you know that there were a good deal of rumors going around about where you’ve been…”

“Actually, Ruby getting knocked up took the heat of me a while ago. At least, that’s what I’ve
“Actually, Ruby getting knocked up took the heat of me a while ago. At least, that’s what I’ve heard. But I shouldn’t gossip,” he smirks.

Chuck nods. “Right, right. How are you, though? I know you didn’t want to start off with half-days when you got back and I’ve been worried you’d overwhelm yourself.”

“Chuck, I’m good. Really. Honestly, if I’d started off taking half-days, I’d go stir crazy. This is my last semester before graduation and I just…wanted a little bit of normalcy. Just a little bit.”

“I get that, Dean. I do. But you need to watch out for yourself, too. Your health is more important than walking that stage, regardless of what you might think now.”

Dean bristles at that and swallows down a harsh retort about how he has to graduate to make his mom proud and to convince his dad and Sam and Uncle Bobby and Aunt Ellen that he actually really, truly is okay. And maybe even himself. “If it gets to be too much, you’ll be the first to know. Well. More likely the third.”

“That’s good enough. Mr. Henrickson mentioned he spoke with you about future plans. Are you giving it any thought?”

“Yeah, actually. I am.”

“You sound surprised at that.”

“Chuck,” Dean sighs in exasperation, “there’s only so much psychoanalysis a man can take in a day. You, Henrickson, Mrs. Mosley…What’re we gonna do next, watch Lifetime together and cry?”

“Don’t pretend you’ve never watched one of those movies.”

“Not my fault. There’s a gazillion channels but never anything to watch.” Dean shrugs but he has spent many hours on Sunday locked in his room watching more of those sappy movies than anyone should. And enjoying them. (But not more than Dr. Sexy, MD. Nothing trumps Dr. Sexy MD.)

“Uh-huh. Well, that’s all I really wanted to talk to you about…make sure you’re settling back in alright.”

“Yeah, I’m good. ‘s like I never left.”

“Good.”

Dean stands and tosses his bookbag over a shoulder and adjusts the collar on his jacket. “See ya, Chuck.”

“See ya, Dean.”

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Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Castiel and Gabriel finally arrive to Charlie’s house, there’s a sleek, long black car parked out front. Gabriel points it out as the pull into the drive. “That’s Dean’s car, by the way.”

“It’s beautiful.”

Gabriel laughs as they climb out of his beater car and walk to the door. “Be sure to tell him that. He might just marry you.”

Dean is sprawled out on the couch with his head in the lap of a laughing red head. He sits up and smiles at Castiel and waves him over while Gabriel shamelessly breezes through the room to head towards the kitchen with a half-hearted wave. “Hey, Cas. You showed up right on time, the movie’s just about the start.” Behind him, the red head clears her throat loudly. Dean ducks his head and scratches at his neck once again. “Right. Sorry. Cas, this is Charlie.”

“Hi!” She chirps. “I’m glad you showed because if Dean got anymore broody, I would’ve kicked his ass out.”

“Broody?”

“Oh, majorly.” Dean closes his eyes and leans his head on the back of the couch. “I hate you both,” he mutters. “Can we just watch the movie now? Please?”

“Sure, Dean. Sam! Gabe! Come on. The Empire waits for no one!”

Dean laughs and Castiel fidgets on the couch awkwardly. Charlie must read his mind because the looks she gives him is one filled with incredulity. “You have no clue what I’m talking about, do you?”

Dean’s eyes fly open and he stares at Castiel, his and Charlie’s twin looks of disbelief make him squirm even more. “You’re shitting me! Cas, no friend of mine is going to go through life without watching Star Wars. For Christ’s sake. Charlie, start the movie, let Gabe and Sammy duke it out over the cookies, for all I care. This is an emergency situation over here.”

Charlie nods at Dean’s order, her face full of determination.

Halfway through the movie and Castiel can say he stopped paying attention the minute Dean inched closer to whisper discreetly which part of the movie was his favorite and which part Castiel needed to watch closely. In one scene, Dean grasps Castiel’s forearm in excitement and points at the screen and Castiel could swear the entire living room could hear the pounding of his heart. He licks his lips and convinces himself that he must be hallucinating because there is no way whatsoever Dean tracked the movement of his tongue with his eyes only to mimic the gesture. No Way.

As the movie ends, Sam is snoring from the floor, leaning against Dean’s leg while he and Charlie decry the upcoming Disney addition to the franchise.
“As if the last three prequels didn’t suck enough. Didn’t the world learn with *Indiana Jones* and *Die Hard*? Leave the classics alone.”

“Or at least wait until we’re all dead to butcher them,” Charlie states.

“Thank God you understand.”

“Of course, of course. What do you take me for, some uncultured swine? Oh. No offense, Castiel.”

“None taken.” At that, Dean’s watch chirps and he swears to himself before kicking Sam awake.

“Rise and shine, Sasquatch. We gotta go.”

“Curfew?” Castiel asks disappointedly. One of the many (and there are many) perks of moving in with Anna and Gabriel rather than living at the boarding school is how much freedom she allows them. There’s no strictly enforced curfew, she simply trusts them to be back at a decent hour when there’s school. The day his father allowed him to transfer to Lawrence High School and move in with his cousins is one of the greatest days of his life.

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Better take Sammy there home before his snoring wake up the neighbors,” Gabriel snarks around a mouthful of cookies. Sam simply flips him over and wishes him luck with managing his diabetes.

“Thanks for having us over, Charlie. See ya, Cas-tiel.”

“No problem, Sam. Have a good night.”

Dean pulls Charlie into a tight hug. “Love ya, Dean.”

He winks, “I know.”

Sam groans from the corner. “Would you geeks hurry it up? Some of us actually plan on waking up on time in the morning.”

“Later, Gabe.”

“Dean-o!” and rather than wave like a semi-sane individual, Gabriel stands and salutes. Dean turns back to Castiel with a warm look in his eyes that Castiel will convince himself later on that he imagine as well. “See you tomorrow, Cas. Have a good night.”

Castiel can feel the corners of his lips twitch up in a smile. “You as well, Dean.”

The door closes behind them quietly and Castiel’s heart warms at the rumbling of Dean’s car as it takes off down the road.

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Dean’s alarm clock doesn’t wake him up the next morning. Instead, he jerks awake at the sound of Sam’s sneezes and muttered curses. Dean rolls over to glare of the bright green numbers illuminated on his clock, “6:02 AM” and drags himself out of bed to see Sam rummaging through the hall closet.

“Dude.”

Sam looks up guiltily under his hair. “Sorry. I was just looking for a box of Kleenex.” At Dean’s raised eye brow, Sam holds up a hand. “Don’t even go there.”

“Wasn’t going to say anything, Sammy. Scout’s honor.”

“That only applies if you’ve actually ever been a Boy Scout.”

“Right. What can I say? I don’t do shorts.”

Sam’s response is cut off by another sneeze and a grunt. “Are you getting sick?”

“No! Well…maybe? I think.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ll talk to Andy today to see if I can stay over his place for a few days until I’m not contagious anymore.”

“Sam.”

“Dean.”

“You don’t have to go through all that. You heard what the doctors said.”

“Dean, if I got you sick…”

“I’m back in school, remember? And it’s January. Half the school is probably crawling with the flu by now.”

Sam sighs. “I hate it when you logic me.”

“Wisdom is one of the perks of being the older brother.” He says as he turns to go back in his room.

“You’re a year older, Dean. A year!”

“Whatever.”

“Dean.” The seriousness of Sam’s tone makes Dean turn around to face him. His brother’s face is drawn up in concern that not even his ridiculous hair cut can hide. His mouth is a thin line and his eyes show a wariness that Dean hasn’t seen since Wichita. “I’m being serious. If you start feeling si—”

“I’ll say something. I promise, Sammy.”

“I’m going to find the antibiotics the docs gave us. And those Vitamin C tablets for you.”

Dean grimaces. He hates those fucking things and Sam knows it but nods an affirmative anyway.
because despite what people seem to think, he hated being sick and will do any and everything in his power to make sure it doesn’t happen again.

Chapter End Notes

Super short update. The next one will have a heck of a lot more dialogue between Cas and Dean on their lonesome and show them interacting together with some backstory for Cas.

I hope you like it!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which John Winchester and Anna make their first appearances. And Gabe's meddling finally comes in handy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Castiel had known Dean, and by extension Sam, Jo, and Charlie, for just under three weeks and the contrast between them and his friends at St. Luke Prep were striking in a way he never thought possible. He’d had friends there, though, they were more of convenience than any real sort of comfort they were able to bring. They were thrust together and had nothing more in common than families with money and connections and their usefulness was a thin veil to the contempt they’d all felt for one another.

The circumstances had altered so drastically in such a short period of time that it made him dizzy with each affectionate utterance of ‘Cas’ rather than ‘Castiel’ or ‘Mr. Milton.’ The thought filled him with warmth as he made his way to his usual table in the cafeteria where Gabriel, Sam, and Jo already sat.

“Cassy! Come on, sit that cute, little tush of yours down. We gotta talk.” As endearing as a nickname as ‘Cas’ was and as much as he loved hearing it in Dean’s baritone, ‘Cassy’ still made him want to beat the smirk off Gabriel’s face.

“Hello to you, too, Gabriel.” Castiel muttered with a sigh, but he took the seat as directed. Dean was absent from school today and Castiel was determined to not let his disappointment show in his mood or demeanor. He’d spent the first half of physics class trying to avoid staring at the door hoping to catch a glance of Dean or staring out the window searching for his Impala. “What is it that we have to talk about that’s so urgent?”

Gabriel rolled his eyes and smirked. “Your lovah!”

Castiel sputtered and tried to fight the blush he knew was creeping up his cheeks. But as the familiar warmth spread to the tips of his ears and his cousin’s smug expression, he knew he’d failed.

“So, Cas,” Sam began, thankfully ignoring Gabriel’s remarks and his own reaction, “Dean’s birthday is this Saturday and we were trying to come up with something to do.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, knowing Dean, he’s probably forgotten all about it. He’s turning 18 and I really wanna do something special for him. Last year, his birthday was kind of a bust so…I don’t know. He deserves it, y’know?” Something dark flickered over Sam’s face and from the corner of his eyes, he saw Jo stiffen in her chair and look away. The moment passed quickly, though, before Castiel even had a chance to analyze it. “Just not a surprise party. Dean hates surprises.”
The rest of lunch was spent planning out ‘Dean’s Birthday Extravaganza’ (titled by Gabriel, naturally) in a flurry of movies, mini-golf, cheap beer that Sam knew Dean enjoyed when their father wasn’t around, and strippers (also Gabriel’s idea). By the time lunch had ended and everyone was making their way to the doors, Castiel had completely forgotten to ask Sam why Dean wasn’t in school that day.

Dean hated the snow. Or, more specifically, he hated driving in snow. Or, even more specifically, he hated driving Baby through the snow and salt-covered roads that he knew was gonna do hatchet work on the paint job. He’d lived in Lawrence all his life, save for those long months spent in Wichita, and he still hadn’t gotten used to it. And after damn-near 18 years of it, he knew he was never going to and that was just fine with him. The one thing he genuinely hated more than driving, or rather riding in his Baby in the snow was the drive to Wichita General that made him twitchy and irritable and miserable. Dean rubbed at his chest, a nervous twitch he developed and that had gotten significantly more pronounced during the drive.

He reclined back a bit more comfortably in the passenger seat of the car, solaced by the familiar creak of the leather and sighed. His Dad was back in town which meant whenever they went anywhere, he was stuck riding Sam’s seat in shotgun. There was a reason that this was Sam’s seat and with another sigh he tried to push that violation of the Winchester Natural Order out of his head.

“Stop being so dramatic, Dean. You’ll be driving your Baby again in no time.”

“It’s rude to read other people’s minds, Dad.”

Even with his eyes glued to the snowy road ahead, he could just feel his father trying not to smile. “Yeah, well. You’ve been huffing and puffing since we left the house. It doesn’t take a psychic to figure out what it’s all about.”

“Maybe I just hate being dragged to Wichita. I’m probably missing a very important lesson in Physics right now.” Physics was important. Cas sitting next to him and squinting at the board was just an added perk. The thought of those blue eyes and the messy dark hair pushed away at the weight that had lodged itself on his chest and he relaxed for the first time since that morning.

“Is this sarcasm thing with you a recent development or did I just miss something?”

“Well, you have been gone a few weeks. No telling what you missed.” Shit. As soon as the piss-poor excuse for a joke left his mouth, he knew he said that wrong thing. He shrunk down in his seat and risked a glance at his father from the corner of his eye like a sheepish child but John’s expression gave nothing away. The time it took for John to speak again was filled with nothing but the purr of Baby beneath him, the slush of snow on the road, and the beating of Dean’s own heart that roared in his ears.

“Dean. Don’t look like I’m going to put you over my knee for telling the truth. I have been gone for a while but you know that I’d stay around all the time if I could. Right?”

Dean nodded. “Yeah, I know. Sammy does, too. We get it, Dad and we know that it’s hard for
you, too.” Dean paused and fiddled with a loose thread on the sleeve of his jacket. “But if the opportunity ever does come up, please don’t think that we want you around all the time. Unless you learn how to cook something other than Ramen.”

John laughed and Dean exhaled, sitting up properly in his seat again. “Who the hell are you telling? That’s all they ever have at rest stops. I spend all day sitting on my ass driving a big rig and stuffing my face with that crap. It’s no wonder my pants are fitting tighter and tighter.”

Dean gave a strained smile. “Well, I wasn’t going to mention anything but… when’s the baby due?”

John threw his head back and laughed again and Dean’s hadn’t realized how much he missed the sound of his father laughing at one of his dumb jokes. Even when John was around all of the past few months before returning to work, there wasn’t much of anything to laugh at and the only sound Dean had heard on a consistent basis was the irregular *beep, beep, beep* of an EKG. And know he was being dragged right back to Wichita General for another check-up. Dean wondered if he’d feel as sick at the thought of that if he was able to go to a different hospital and not back to where it looked like everything was going all to hell.

“Dean.” Dean was jerked back from his thought by his father’s voice and reassuring grip on his shoulder. “Stop worrying. You’re fine – everything’s going to be fine. You’ve been taking your meds, right?” he asked with a pointed glare to which Dean nodded in agreement. “And you’ve been doing everything the docs have told you. Even if I’m not there, I know your brother’s been mother henning you all this time so trust me when I tell you this. You’re fine. This is just a formality.” Dean nodded, not trusting his voice, as John turned into the hospital parking lot.

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When Castiel and Gabriel arrived home, Anna was sitting at the dining room table frowning at her laptop. “What’re you doing, Anna?”

“Huh? Oh, I didn’t hear you guys come in. Working on an article.”

“Here?” Gabriel asked.

“Yeah. Me being home earlier than normal gonna be a problem for you guys?” Anna arched an eye brow and Castiel smiled.

“No. No problem. Gabriel and I are just here to grab his computer and then we’re going to a friend’s.”

“Oh?”

“I do have friends, Anna.”

“I’m not doubting that, Castiel. Promise.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.”

“And what are you going to be doing at this friend’s?”
“He’s planning a birthday party for the man of his dreams!” Gabriel chirped from the top of the stairs. “The man of his very kinky wet dreams.”

“Gabriel!”

“Is he cute?”

“Oh, god. I hate you both.”

“He’s very cute! You should see eyes! And, I have it on rather good authority that under all those layers of leather and flannel, he is ripped,”

“I’ll be in the car trying to regain some of my dignity.”

The ride to Charlie’s was a quiet one. It was snowing lightly and Castiel rested his head against the cold glass of the passenger window and enjoyed the view of passing houses and their snow-covered lawns before Gabriel spoke. “Castiel, you know I’m just teasing, right?”

“Huh?”

“When I’m talking about Dean. I’m just kidding around. I know you like him. Hell, why do you think I introduced you two? If I’m…being too much, you can just tell me and I’ll shut up.”

Castiel smiled warmly at his cousin. “When aren’t you too much?”

Gabriel laughed and turned the radio to a random pop-filled radio station. “Touché, cousin. Touché.”

Everyone was lounging around in Charlie’s living room in a scene reminiscent to the first night Castiel was there, with the exception of Dean’s absence.

“You guys are late.” Charlie sing-songed.

“Apologies.”

When all was said and done, ‘Dean’s Birthday Extravaganza’ had shaped up to be a decidedly low-key affair, much to Gabriel’s protests. They’d meet again at Charlie’s house (whose parents would be out of town visiting relatives) on Saturday for cheap drinks, food, music, and movies. When Gabriel huffed out in faux-annoyance; “How is this supposed to be any different from any other of your nerd gatherings?” Sam, Jo, and Charlie replied in unison: “Pie,” before dissolving into laughter at Gabriel’s understanding nod and Castiel’s confused expression. He realized then that he was learning about all the intricacies of Dean without spending any real time alone with him which brought a strange and contradicting ball of emotions to sit in his gut.
Dean heard the front door opening and closing even with his head jammed securely under his pillow. He heard the muffled exchange between his father and brother before he heard his bedroom door open. Peering out from under his pillow, he saw Sam’s Sasquatch outline as the light from the hallway flooded into his darkened room.

“Dean?”

“Trying to sleep here, Sammy.”

“It’s not even nine yet.”

“Yeah, well, I’m tired.” There was a moment of silence before he heard the door shut and he hoped Sam had taken the hint and left him alone to wallow. Then he felt the bed dip down and knew he would never be so lucky.

“Are you okay?”

“Peachy.”

“Dad said the test results came back fine, Dean.”

“Well, since you know so damn much, what are you talking to me for?” he snapped. On a purely intellectual level, he knew he was being irrational and unfair to his brother who was only expressing concern. If the roles were reversed, he’d be an immobile boulder in Sam’s room if he found him wallowing his self-imposed exhale after being told he was perfectly healthy. But fuck the entire trip and experience was draining in a way that Dean wouldn’t have thought possible two years ago.

“Dean, look, I get okay? Just talk to me. Please.”

Dean emerged out from under his pillow and rolled over onto his back. When he felt moisture seep from his eyes and run down to his ears, he was utterly relieved and thankful for the darkness that hid his breakdown. He steeled his nerves and cleared his throat before speaking when he felt Sam growing restless and impatient. “No, you really, really don’t.”

“Just…I wanna know what’s going on in your head.”

He exhaled and clenched his eyes shut around the tears that wouldn’t seem to slow or stop. “I know what the docs said – that I’m fine but… it’s like I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop, y’know? They keep telling me that I’m fine but for how much longer?”

“Dean. You can’t live your life waiting for bad news at every turn. You’ll be miserable.”

“Yeah, well. All I know is that I was fine yesterday and the day before and the day before. It’s like I can push it all out of my head for a while and then on the way there I thought I was gonna punch something. If I wasn’t in Baby, I might’ve puked.”

“Maybe you should’ve kept seeing that shrink.”

Dean groaned. He hated even thinking about those awkward session with his appointed psychologist that made him talk about his feelings and his illness and all the stresses of the world. For god’s sake, he’d rather bang his head against the wall than go back to that pointy-headed
fucker. “No. I’ll deal just like I always do.”

“You’re the strongest person I know, Dean but it doesn’t make you weak to ask for extra help. When you got sick, just before it got bad, I remember being so scared I was gonna lose you. I think it was the only time I’d ever seen Dad cry outside of Mom’s birthday or their anniversary. He was just wrecked. But that thing that just sticks out in my mind is how I knew you were scared, too, but you tried so hard to make us and Uncle Bobby and Aunt Ellen and Jo feel better through the entire thing when you were so sick. You always take care of everybody and it’s not such a bad thing if you let us take care of you sometimes, too.”

“I know. I’m just tired, Sammy. I’ll feel better in the morning,” he gave a ghost of a smile to no one in particular, thankful no one could see it. “I always do.”

He watched Sam brush a hand through his shaggy hair while he stood at the side of Dean’s bed. “Good night, Dean.”

“You too, Sammy.”

For the first time in the entire history of his friendship, Dean was grateful for Gabe and his incessant meddling, so much so that he felt the closest to happy he’s felt all day when he reached over to his desk for his cell phone. He scrolled through his contacts and smiled when he found what he was looking for and shot off a quick text message.

Hi Cas.

The reply was swift. Hello, Dean. I assume Gabriel put my number in your phone as well.

You assume correctly. So...how was class today.

Riveting. And Dean could just see his face when he gave the deadpan response. Henrickson’s lecture on acceleration was awe-inspiring.

Smartass.

Amongst other things. Why were you absent today?

Dean should’ve been expecting this question but he had no answer prepared but came up with a lie quickly enough. My dad’s in town and he needed help with some things. Nothing major but I’m ahead in all my classes so...

You decided to take vacation.

Exactly. You’re a genius.

:)  

What are you doing now?

Aside from talking to you? Listening to Anna and Gabriel discuss the lyricism of Katy Perry’s new album

Ouch.
Indeed.

Do you maybe wanna get out of the house for a little bit?

To do what?

IDK. Stir up a little mischief, maybe? Or just talk.

This time, Cas’s reply took a little longer than previously and for a second Dean mentally kicked himself until his phone chirped in his hand. *I would like that very much, Dean.*

Cool. Omw

*Text me when you’re outside and I’ll come out.*

Great! See you in a few, Cas.

Chapter End Notes

Finally some alone time for Cas and Dean!

Hope to have the next chapter ready and up by early next week! Thanks for reading.
This chapter is mostly Dean's POV.

There are times where Dean can admit he’s being particularly emo and bitchy about life and he tries damn hard to put everything in perspective – especially the past year and a half that he spent being shuffled to and from hospitals and doctors getting poked and prodded on his worst days. He’s angry, though he does his best to hide it and he knows being around his friends and family help some. Being around Cas, though, almost makes it feel like he’s not constantly worried that his heart will just stop beating in his chest and that he’ll drop like a log. Sometimes, Dean forgets all of his, albeit misplaced, anger that his Dad has to work so far away for so long to keep decent health insurance that’ll cover all of Dean’s medications and pay enough to keep a roof over their heads and even stash some away in college funds (he’s not even sure that he’ll need). Sometimes those blue eyes can make him less annoyed by all of Sam’s hovering and mother henning when he so much as stubs his toe and he’s more grateful for that than he can put into words.

What he also learned in the past few months is to stop being a pussy. Not an eloquent thought by any means, but he knows what it feels like to think you have no future and nowhere to go other than deeper in a pit of self-pity where you’re too tired to keep counting a seemingly never-ending list of regrets. So while they sit in a comfortable silence with nothing but the rumble of the Impala and the quiet hum of Zeppelin on the radio, Dean tries to put his scattered thoughts into words because he’s done playing coy. Done.

The car comes to a stop in front of the darkened and abandoned school under the halo of a streetlight. The Impala’s headlights illuminate the large puffs of snowflakes that continue to fall and Dean’s struck by the thought that he doesn’t even mind driving his Baby in this weather as long as he’s with Cas. Woah.

Cas fidgets in the passenger seat and the leather squeaks beneath him. “I think we are a bit early for school, Dean.” Dean flicks his eyes over to Cas to see a familiar head tilt and squint and warmth blooms over Dean’s chest at the gesture. “Or late. I suppose it depends on your perspective.”

Dean smiles and exhales heavily in the silence that follows. He goes to rub at his sternum, but catches the gesture in time and frowns. “Are you alright, Dean?” Rather than answer with words, Dean reaches across the bench seat and grips Cas’s cold hand in his own and interlaces their fingers. He’s certain he hears the other boy’s sharp intake of breath but brushes it off as the wind outside. Dean looks up and turns to Cas to find wide blue eyes trained on him and his mouth slightly agape and he fights the urge to kiss the baffled looks off his face. At least, for now.

“Cas, I’m about to start blabbering any second now, okay? I just need you to promise that you won’t interrupt because I don’t think I’ll work up the nerve to say what I have to say all over again. Deal?” Cas nodded tightly and Dean exhaled.

“I’m bad at this emotional stuff, y’know? Like, really bad but…I like you. And I think your weasel of a cousin knows that, too, if he went through all the trouble of talking you up to me before we’d even met and sneaking your number in my phone and…” Dean stopped and closed
his eyes momentarily before continuing. “Last year, I don’t know, it sort of changed my priorities a little bit so I’m all helluva lot less worried about embarrassing myself over this chick flick moment or you not liking me back – “ Dean hesitates and grunts in frustration at himself and the still-stunned look on Cas’s face. He squeezes his eyes closed for a moment, drawing on the last of his reserves, and leans forwards into Cas’s space and presses their lips together in a chaste kiss. Castiel’s grip on his own hand tightens, but Dean doesn’t pull back. Instead, he works his free hand up to Cas’s jaw and strokes his thumb over cheekbone.

Cas, the slow bastard, seems to catch on releases Dean’s hand. Before panic can settle in that he’s fucked this up somehow, warms hands find their way to the back of his neck to push them closer together and a tongue swipes over his bottom lip and all the tentativeness of the kiss is pushed away. Cas moans and Dean’s heart flutters (in a good way). They explore each other’s mouths in the warmth and comfort of the Impala and Dean wonders the when he was last this happy – this genuinely happy and smiles when they finally pull apart for air.

“Dean?” Cas asks and Dean has to jerk his eyes away from Cas’s spit-slick lips and the creeping flush of pink over his cheeks.

“Yeah, Cas?”

“That...makes me very happy.”

“Oh yeah?”

Cas nods. “Yes. I have wanted to do that for a long time.”

“So this was worth interrupting family night with Gabe and Anna?”

Cas’s answering laugh is gravely and deeps and Dean surges forward again to capture his lips in another kiss. “Let’s do something.”

“This doesn’t count?”

“You horndog, you.” Dean fake chastises with a cocked brow. “I meant like a date. We don’t get to spend much time together without somebody being there and I don’t know...I guess I want to know you better.” Dean can feel heat crawling up to the tips of his ears but he means it. Shoe-horning his seat next to Cas at lunch every day isn’t cutting it.

“What did you have in mind?”

Dean shrugs. “My dad’s leaving town Friday night for a few days so it’ll probably be my turn for ‘family night’ then but maybe Saturday? We can watch a movie. And snuggle.”

“Snuggle?”

“Oh, you haven’t lived until you’ve snuggled with me.”

Cas chuckles and Dean strokes his thumb over his cheek once again when his watch chirps. The reminder to take his pills sinks in his stomach like a lead weight.

“Curfew?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s getting late.”
The drive back to Castiel’s house is spent in silence once again and thinks that maybe he misread whatever just happened when Cas doesn’t answer his request for a date. However, when he parks in front of the other boy’s house, Cas turns to him and they kiss briefly again. “I’d love to go on a date with you, Dean.”

“Really?”

Cas nods. “Yes. Saturday.”

Dean smiles so wide that the thinks he’s going to split his face in two. “Great! I’ll call you?”

“Yes. Good night, Dean.”

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It’s not until Castiel reaches the top step of the house (where Gabriel and Anna are still bickering) before he realizes that he just planned a date on the night of Dean’s surprise birthday party and he steels himself for whatever comments Gabriel has to throw his way when he finds out.

Chapter End Notes

Short update is short (and late). Sorry!! Hope you enjoy it, though.

Thanks for all the subscriptions/comments/kudos/bookmarks. They make me smile!!

BTW: Dean's illness will be featured more heavily in the next couple of chapters. It's a really important element for the story so it's not going to stay in the background forever.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Long-ish update to make up for the lack of update earlier in the week. Hope you enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next day, Castiel finds himself standing at Dean’s locker with a small smile across his lips. Dean’s jamming notebooks into his bookbag and laughs when Castiel recounts the event of last night after Dean dropped him off at home. He tells him about Gabriel and Anna waiting up for him with knowing smiles and raised eyebrows when he crossed the threshold into the house. Dean laughs and warmth pools in Castiel’s belly at the sound. He can so easily ignore the student body that surround them going on with their early morning routines in favor of just making Dean laugh like that again, to see his smile and how his eyes sparkle with it. A sense of happiness so foreign to him pierces through his chest and the urge to just touch Dean is overwhelming. So, when Dean fishes out his phone from his pocket and hands it to him, Castiel lets their fingers linger a little longer than necessary just savoring Dean being right there. Intellectually, he knows that he’s only known Dean a short time and that they haven’t even gone on a date yet but still… This is Dean and that’s all that really matters now.

When they fingers pull apart, Castiel scrolls through Dean’s text messages as instructed. His small smile stretches wider and a blush crawls up his cheeks when he reads the messages from Gabriel, Jo, Charlie, and even Sam.

Jo: ‘Got yourself a looker this time, huh? Betcha can’t wait to strip that trenchcoat off his ass!!’

Sam: ‘Jess wants to go on a double date. I’m just going to go walk in traffic now.’

Gabriel: [a pornographic picture of two men that openly makes Castiel sputter and the tips of his ears tinge pink]

“It hasn’t even been twelve hours yet, Cas. News spreads fast I guess.” Dean says. But when he turns from his locker and tosses his bag over his shoulders, Castiel can tell that he feels just as happy as he does.

“It would appear so. I don’t even want to think about how Gabriel found that picture.” Dean shuts his locker with a soft click and appears to ponder the question.

“Hell if I know but it’s a good angle for those dudes, though.”

It’s Castiel’s turn to laugh now as they walk towards class. He can see Dean glance at him from the corner of his eye before the taller boy reaches out and joins their hands together in the hallway.

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Class is uneventful as always. Although he’d never admit it out loud to anyone, Dean really likes Henrickson. The guy can be a dick, sure, but he’s blunt and honest and clear in his expectations. He still gives Dean extra work from his college professor friend and Dean breezes through it with relative ease on most nights. When he hands them in at the end of the week, his chest swells with pride under Henrickson’s appraising gaze. And Henrickson, the sometimes-dick, likes to play games with Dean – make him sweat like he’s screwed up somehow and made a terrible miscalculation. But Dean knows there’s no error on the pages he’s handed in. He’s confident and knows that he’s damn good at this. His dad’ll sometimes ask where the interest in math and physics came from of all places and Dean just shrugs it off and acts like he just got lucky somehow.

But Dean knows better.

In his mind, it’s not much different than working on cars – something that he’s loved doing for as long as he could remember. He can tinker away with an alternator or on his calculator and know that there’s only going to be one right answer, only one right way to fix whatever specific problem is wrong with the car part. It doesn’t matter the time of day, whether or not John’s home or even in the same time zone, if he’s sick and tired and achy and just in a bitch of a mood. The numbers are always the same and he can count on that when he can’t really count on anything else. Although, Cas is in the picture now so maybe he can add something else to the list after all.

Class ends and Dean gives Cas a wink before heading to Henrickson’s desk like he does every Friday. So, he gives the man his problem sets with a few other papers tucked away underneath. Henrickson acknowledges Dean with his regular grunt and starts going through the papers, comparing them with his own answer sheet. He finishes the problem set and sees Dean’s other papers tucked away and raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“This what I think it is, Winchester?”

Dean shrugs and looks away. “Believe it or not, sometimes I listen.” His eyes dart back to Henrickson’s desk where four college applications sit in the man’s hands. Kansas State is on top. It’s his safety but he knows he’s not enough of a farm boy to enjoy staying in Kansas for longer than he has too. Then there’s University of California – Berkley and Cal Tech, although he’s not sure how well he’d fit in in those towns of all places. After that is MIT, his dream school. In increasingly less-fleeting moments, when Dean closes his eyes and pictures himself at any school in the world, it’s there. When Henrickson flicks the pages to that application Dean can feel a chill run up his spine at the thought of the man outright laughing and chucking the application in the garbage with the rest of the trash.

“These are some lofty schools here.”

“I know.”

“Well, if you’re expecting me to shoot you down on any of them, you’re wrong.”

“Really?”

Henrickson nods. “Really. Like I told you, you’ve got potential, Dean. It’s a shame to let it all flitter away because of whatever reason you’ve drummed up in that over-gelled head of yours.”

Dean exhales and Henrickson’s dig rolls right off his back. “So. Did you mean what you said about writing a letter for me?”

“Of course. You thinking about engineering?”
“Maybe? I don’t know. I like putting stuff together and I like this stuff so it seemed like a good way to go.”

“Talk to the auto-mechanics teacher then for another letter. And of course Shurley would write one for you. For some reason, the guy seems to like you quite a bit.”

“What can I say? I’m adorable.”

Henrickson laughs and the sound is unfamiliar. “You got an essay?”

“Uhm, yeah.” Dena shuffles his weight from foot to foot before reaching into the notebook in his hand and pulling out a few pages filled with his scribbled writing. “You think you can look that over, too?”

“Dean. You can stop acting like I’m about to turn you down for the prom. I told you that I wanted to help and I meant it. I’ll read it and we can talk about it on Monday. That work for you?”

“Uh. Yeah! Uhm, yes. That’s great, actually.”

“Good. Now, you’d better be going – you’re already late for second period.”

“Right! Thanks, He—Mr. Henrickson.”

Henrickson smiles at Dean as he makes his way to the door. “No problem, kid.”


Everyone beat Dean to lunch again and Castiel has stopped being surprised by that by now. He exhales a deep breath before leaning over onto the table so he can speak lowly to them incase Dean makes an appearance. “We have to talk.”

“About?” Sam asks, brow arched with his fork of salad held midair.

“Dean and I have a date.”

“Sooo..?” Jo speaks now and Castiel lets out a frustrated huff.

“Apparently your Dad,” he says to Sam, “leaves town tonight and Dean wanted to be there for that so we agreed to go tomorrow and at the time I was a bit…sidetracked and completely forgot about the ‘Not-Surprise Surprise Party’ until I got home. I didn’t even think to ask to reschedule to another day at the time and then it was because I didn’t want to be rude and –“ it’s only with the annoying amused grin on Gabriel’s face that Castiel realizes that he’s talking a mile a minute and quite possibly blowing the entire situation completely out of proportion. He looks around the table to find similar expressions on Sam and Jo’s faces as well and Castiel resists the urge to bang his head on the nearest solid object.

“Wow. Is he always like this when he’s nervous?” Sam asks Gabriel.

“Only when he’s really flustered. And I guess your brother getting him all hot and bothered isn’t exactly helping matters.”

“Guys, leave Cas alone. It’s cute.” Castiel fails to resist his urges this time and rolls his eyes at that. “Why don’t you drive the night of the ‘party’ and be all gentlemanly and bring him by
Charlie’s house.”

“But I thought Dean hates surprises.”

“He does, generally. But he really likes you, so I guess it cancels out? Charlie’s folks have a really nice deck out back. Since we’ve got the place to ourselves until Sunday night, you guys could do something cute and date-y back there for a while and come back in when you get too cold.”

“Good idea, Sam! Is that how you woo’d Jess?” Gabriel asks around a mouthful of cookies.

Sam looks away at the question and ducks his head into his salad and Jo outright cackles. Castiel stares at them like they are mad. “Hell no. She asked him out because Romeo over here couldn’t work up the nerve to even talk to her for more than five minutes even when they lab partners in bio. Most awkward class ever.”

“Shut up, Jo.”

“That-that is a very good idea, Sam. Thank you. But…you won’t mind that I would take up so much time on Dean’s birthday after you’ve all planned this for him? I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“Of course not, Cas. Just make sure we don’t walk in on anything and we’re good.”

“Agreed.” Gabriel remarks.

Castiel finally relaxes back into his chair and his lunch when he sees Dean enter the cafeteria, brown paper bag in hand. He smiles when their eyes meet and makes his way to the table to take his customary seat next to Castiel and all talk of Dean’s ‘Not-Surprise Surprise Party’ that somehow turned into being a surprise back dies just as quickly as it began.

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The idea of sending off his college application and Henrickson pouring over his essay with a bleeding red pen weighs heavily on his mind even has he enters the cafeteria – late again. This time, though, he’s spent the time after his last class in his shop teacher’s empty classroom trying to work up the nerves to ask for another recommendation letter and by the end of it, he’d come out with two letter as good as in his hand. Working on Chuck would be easy.

What wouldn’t be so easy would be actually talking about it with people other than his teachers – so he uses his group of friends gathered together for lunch as guinea pigs when they grill him on his lack of punctuality.

“I was doing stuff for some college applications, nothing too serious.” Dean says. He can see Sam’s eyes widen a bit in shock and he’s not at all surprised by the reaction. When Dean was sick, when he thought he was as good as dead before he even had his driver’s license, he didn’t think about a future beyond doctor’s appointments and inevitable hospitalizations. That was always Sam’s gig – been talking about going off to Stanford for years. So this new thing of Dean actually thinking about a future and pursuing it, is just as much of a shock to himself as it is to his little brother.

“Isn’t it a little late for that?” Cas asks from beside him and Dean can see Jo stiffen a bit in her seat. Besides Sam, the only other person at this table that knows what his life has been like these last few years has been Jo. The girl’s practically family. Dean can only bring himself to shrug
initially at Cas’s question before blue eyes flick to him and he feels all but compelled to answer – as much as he’s willing to at this point.

“Yeah, typically. I called around and got the okay from a few schools to do late applications.”

“Well aren’t you just the charmer, Dean-o.” Dean flicks a kernel of corn at Gabe and smiles victoriously when it lands right between his eyes.

“Oh. That’s extremely fortunate. Where have you applied?”

“Nowhere yet,” Dean stalls and takes a sip of his drink. “I guess I’ll send them in sometime next week.”

“He looks up to find Sam’s gaze locked on his in silent question. ‘You mean it?’ And Dean gives a small nod of his head to his brother and goes back to his lunch.

“Cassie got his first acceptance letter in the mail earlier this week!”

Dean smiles over at his blue-eyed friend, a rush of fondness washing over him at Cas’s blush at the attention. “From Brandeis. Boston seems like an enjoyable city.”

The conversation turns then to talks about futures away from Lawrence, Kansas – lives spent outside of the dullness of such a flat state and talks of crop yields and dust storms in exchange for bright city lights on the costs and Dean finds himself sitting up a bit taller by the end of lunch, more sure of himself than he has been in a long time.

John leaves that night, so after school Dean and Sam go straight home and cook dinner while John is out with Bobby for a bit. Dean has long since stopped feeling sad at his father’s departure. Now he’s filled with the conflicting emotions of always being surprised to see John come but never feeling much when he goes. By the time they get home, Dean’s tired but schools his expression as he cooks spaghetti. Sam hovers close behind preparing garlic bread and Dean just knows his brother is itching to talk about what changed Dean’s mind about college and a life outside of Lawrence but he’ll do his damndest to avoid that conversation for as long as he can. What the heck is he supposed to say, anyway? He’s tired of waiting on his heart to just stop cold in his chest and for his meds to stop working and living in limbo. He’s taken his brother’s advice to heart but after dealing with Sam his entire life and being practically attached at the hip, he knows how Sam would react. They’d hug and talk about maybe going to the same city for college and it’s open season for Sam’s unsolicited advice on his life and Dean would rather not, thanks.

So instead he cranks up the radio to some cheesy pop station Sam likes, willing to endure that than a chick-flick moment heart-to-heart with his brother.

The front door open and closes while he and Sam are fanning smoke away from the smoke detector. Behind them, John chuckles. “What’s all this?” he asks.

“Dinner.” Dean remarks before turning to cough in the crook of his elbow.

“I gathered that much, Dean. I mean what’s the occasion.”

“Didn’t’ want you out on the road with an empty stomach, so…we cooked. Well, I cooked. Sam
mostly burned the bread, as you can see.” Sam jabs an elbow into his ribs in response as he continues to scrape the burnt bits of the edge of the bread, hair flopping in his face.

“Oh.” John blinks and if Dean didn’t know any better, he’d think he read surprise in his father’s face. But whatever was there flickers away quickly as John closes the distance between himself and table and takes his seat.

Conversation over dinner is light: John’s route, school, Dean and Sam’s weekend plans. Dean’s cough doesn’t seem to want to fade even after two cups of cola, but he does his best to keep it subdued. When it’s time for John to leave, he stands and pulls both boys into tight hugs and pats them affectionately on the back. “You boys look out for each other.” They nod simultaneously while John gathers his bags and the keys to the pick-up. From the door, he beckons Sam over. Dean tries not to eavesdrop or acknowledge the jealousy curling in his stomach at the shared secret between his father and brother while they whisper to one another by the door. He turns away when he sees John hand Sam something in a crumpled paper bag before he leaves them again.

While Sam gets started on the dishes, Dean fishes out his phone to shoot off a quick text.

is it lame that I’m already excited about our date tomorrow?

Even though he knows he’ll see Cas tomorrow and saw him multiple times throughout the day earlier, Dean relishes the opportunity to enjoy Cas’s presence even if it is only in the form of a grammatically-correct text message. His phone chirps from the table as he hears Sam click the radio back on in the kitchen and he smiles when he reads the speedy reply from Cas.

I hope not. I have been excited since you asked. :)

That’s a relief. See ya soon Cas.

See you soon, Dean.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so...there's not been much in the way of the sick!Dean tag in the story yet, but if you keep reading, I pinky-promise that it's going to happen soon. Like, really soon. This chapter was mostly set-up for a lot that's going to come into play later on - Dean's birthday, him and Cas, his health...all that good stuff.

I'm a sucker for Dean!whump and Dean-centric h/c so just know that it is coming. After a little bit of Destiel bonding.

PS. Classes start back up again on Monday. This is my second-to-last semester of college so senioritis is in full effect. After Monday updates will still happen in what I hope is a timely manner, but there won't be a set schedule.

PPS. Thanks for reading, review and leaving kudos! I love getting those notification emails when you guys review.
Dean likes sleeping in. He’s never been much in the way of a morning person and without class as a motivator to drag himself out of bed, he likes to sleep or stay secluded away until he can muster the wherewithal to drag himself out of bed to find coffee before he can feel remotely human again. With his health issues, he’s had to cut back on the amount of caffeine he can have but even a little sip of the black coffee is a hell of a lot better than his life without any. Today especially when he has been overloading on those damn Vitamin C fizzy tablets, that he can taste even when he freakin’ burps, to stave off the cold he feels coming on. The very last thing he needs is to get sick and deal with Sam’s hovering for a week. He doubts even the Pope has that kind of patience.

So, he rolls out of bed and slumps across the room to grab his t-shirt. He catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror and stops to take stock. After living off hospital food for months and months, Dean was left thinner and scrannier than he’d ever been after puberty. He’d regained most of the muscle mass he’d lost in time, but he’d also gained a new scar that runs down the center of his chest that stands stark against pale skin. Because the freaking freckles all over his upper body wasn’t bad enough.

Dean sighs and pulls the shirt over his head and shuffles down to the kitchen. Where he would normally expect to find Sam eating some bullshit egg white omelet, he sees Sam and Jo and Ellen and Bobby all gathered around the table full of pastries, looking up expectantly at him.

“Uhm. Hi. Did I miss something?” he asks, rubbing the back of his neck embarrassed. Their all dressed and put together and it even looks like Sam made some effort to comb his hair. But there Dean stands, still in his pajamas and his hair standing wildly from sleep. He feels like a child standing before them and he diverts his eyes away when Bobby cocks a brow at him so high that it disappears under the brim of his ratty trucker hat.

“Told ya the idjit boy would forget again.” Bobby mutters. Ellen shushes him but from the gleam in her eye, Dean can tell she doesn’t completely disagree. God, they are weird and a total old-married couple despite the fact they’ve only been officially hitched for three and a half years. And it still gives Dean the heebee geebes to even think about it.

“Forget what?” Dean asks, genuinely confused and curious now. He turns to Sam and sends him a look. Despite being a complete pain in the ass, one of the good things about him and their relationship is their ability to read each other. It probably has something to do with them only being a little over a year apart and spending so much time alone but Dean likes to think that even without all of that, they’d still have their convenient Mind Meld going on.

His brother just rolls his eyes like he can sense Dean’s confusion and distress. “Dean,” he begins slowly in that tone he uses when Dean’s being particularly clueless and Dean hates it, “what day is today?”
“Uh, Saturday?”

“Oh, my God. He’s a dope.” Jo declares from her seat beside Sam. “It’s January 24th, dingus! It’s your freakin’ birthday!”

Dean blinks. Oh. Oh. Jeez, he is an idiot. A clueless, dopey, idiot. “Crap.” The group in his kitchen takes that as their cue to let out really obnoxious laughter and Dean feels his face heat.

“Dude. How do you manage to forget your own birthday? Again!” The bad thing about so close with his brother is that they really, really know how to get on each other’s nerves. Sam’s a know-it-all and Dean just barely resists to urge to revert to a five year old and stick his tongue out at his annoying little brother – he’s eighteen now. An adult.

Ellen appears to take pity on him at that moment and steps forward with a box of pastries. She hands it to him and kisses him lovingly on the cheek. For all the woman’s brass and bark, she’s been like a second mother to him and Sam and he will always be grateful for her being in their lives. “Eat up, sweetie. We were planning on taking you out for breakfast but Sam said you like to sleep in and we didn’t want to disturb you on your big day.” Dean ducks his head and smiles down at Ellen before she reaches out and hugs him again. “Eighteen. I can’t believe it!”

“Making you feel old there, Mom?”

“You hush up now, Joanna Beth!” Jo bristles at the use of her full name and Sam hides a laugh behind his hand.

Dean all but inhales a blueberry muffin while Ellen and Bobby putters around him. When John started leaving him and Sam alone when they were old enough to at least pretend they could take care of themselves, Ellen would invite herself over (as if she knew that the two of them were too proud to call her) and help them keep the place straightened out and clean and would cook enough food to keep them alive for a little while longer. Today’s not that different from those days – Ellen takes it upon herself to straighten up their living room while Bobby stands at the stove brewing a massive pot of chili for today and with enough leftovers to keep them fed well into the week (and Sam gassy enough until Easter).

They all congregate in the living room when the chili’s done and because Dean never turns down food, he happily accepts the bowl that Bobby offered.

“What’re you kids up to today?” Ellen asks.

Bobby snorts. “Seeing as how Dean completely spaced on his birthday, he probably doesn’t have much on the agenda.”

“Actually,” Dean starts, stirring what little remains in his bowl, “I do have plans.”

“Oh?” At Ellen’s raised eyebrow, Jo chirps up beside him. “Dean’s got a date tonight!”

“Shut up, Jo.” Dean hisses.

“Jo, leave the poor boy alone. Look at how red he’s getting!” And Jo, being as evil as she’s always been, just laughs like it’s the funniest thing she’s ever seen. Dean has known her since she was born and he’s almost positive that the older she gets, the more irritating she can be. It’s a frightening concept.

“Well, this oughta make you feel better, boy.” Bobby says as he stands and walks to the hall closet
near the living room door. Dean cranes his neck in his seat when Bobby bends down and emerges with a large box wrapped in green wrapping paper.

Dean all but tosses his bowl to the side and grins giddily up at the present that Bobby sets in his lap. “Is it a puppy, Uncle Bobby? I really hope it’s a puppy.” He asks, batting his eye lashes at the older man.

Bobby rolls his eyes in response. “You two chuckleheads can barely keep yourselves fed and out of trouble. What kinda person would I be to leave an innocent critter with the two of you?”

“Hey!” Sam protests but Dean ignores him and Bobby’s insult as he tears into the wrapping paper that goes flying everywhere.

“Ooooh!” Dean chuckles when the present is revealed. It’s a tool kit that Dean’s been eyeing for months now. It’s almost twice the size of his current one and he drools at all the prospect of all the new things he can tinker with around the house. “Oh, guys. She’s beautiful. We’re gonna have so much fun together!”

“Dean, if you even think about taking apart my computer again, I’m breaking out the super glue.”

“Geez, Sammy. That was one time! And we both know who won that prank war. You want there to be more Nair in your shampoo?”

Sam glowers and Dean smiles innocently over the new tool kit in his lap.

“Seriously guys, this is awesome. Thanks so much.”

Once the dishes are cleared, Sam, Dean, and Jo head upstairs to his room the very second they see Ellen take a swat at Bobby’s backside. No one should have to endure that, Dean thinks, especially him on his birthday. Dean eyes his phone from the bedside table and sees a slew of text messages from Charlie, Gabriel, and Cas and his expression must give too much away by the way Jo is sitting cross-legged on his bed batting her eye lashes at him.

“How is that look even more terrifying than when you were twelve?” (When Jo had convinced herself she was in love with Dean, ditched her pigtails and followed him around everywhere. She’d make doe eyes at him and Ellen would threaten him for corrupting her kid and Dean didn’t know what to do.)

“If I had known you were gay when I was twelve, it would’ve saved us both a lot of time and energy.”

Sam chortles and Dean flips them both off. Jo’s statement isn’t entirely accurate but explaining his sexual preferences to his brother and the closest thing he has to a sister is not something that he wants to do again. It’s none of their business anyway. “Cas and I have a date tonight. Is that weird? Our first date on my birthday? I didn’t even realize that it was today – my birthday, not the date – when I asked him out! God, he must think I’m a moron…or a freak sentimental weirdo that _.”

“Dean,” Sam begins, although his name sounds like more of a sigh of exasperation than anything else, “dude, relax. I have a pretty good feeling that Cas doesn’t care. At all.”

“You mean it?”
“Oh, god when did you become such a chick?”

“Stuff it, Joanna Beth or I’ll tell Ellen what really happened to her throw rug.” Jo snaps her mouth shut so quickly that Dean’s sure he hears her teeth clink together and he smirks. Sam shakes his head at the two of them before shoving Dean off into the bathroom to shower and get dressed.

On Saturday afternoon Castiel and Gabriel make work preparing the house for Dean’s party while Charlie excuses herself to finish wrapping Dean’s present. There’s not much to clean because Charlie’s parents keep a tidy home, but there’s balloons, a few streamers, and a seemingly endless supply of snacks, courtesy of Gabriel. Castiel spends an inordinate amount of time obsessing over Charlie’s film collection, pulling out selections that he figures Dean will enjoy if they decide to watch anything.

Castiel is nervous and from the smug glances Gabriel keeps throwing him whenever he rakes a hand through his hair, he knows it shows. He likes Dean and is pretty certain that Dean likes him as well but there is so much that they don’t know about one another. But from the short time that they’ve known one another, Castiel knows without a single doubt that Dean is a good person and he hopes Dean thinks the same of him. He hears Gabriel shift behind him and turns to see his cousin staring at him with a surprisingly serious expression.

“Is everything alright, Gabriel?”

“Uh,” Castiel blinks because he can’t remember a time when he’s seen Gabriel this visibly flustered. His trademark grin and he won’t meet Castiel’s eye while he thumbs idly at the hem of his shirt. “So, I don’t really know how I’m supposed to do this.”

“Do what exactly?”

Gabriel closes his eyes and exhales forcefully before straightening himself up to full height and continuing, “Well, you’re gay and Dean is – or well, I’m pretty sure he is, anyway, and I don’t know how advanced he is but I do know you and you aren’t. Like, at all. So…do we need to have ‘the talk’ or something?”

Castiel’s eyes widen and once the shock of what Gabriel’s said and what he’s attempting to do wears off, he does his best to swallow down a laugh. “Are you prepared to give me this ‘talk’?”

“Maybe? I might have Googled some things.” The way Gabriel’s face is painted red and the thought of his cousin sitting alone at a computer research gay sex on his behalf undoes Castiel’s strength of will and he laughs so hard his stomach aches. Gabriel just looks a little pained before muttering what a ‘great big bag of dicks’ Castiel is before wandering off to find Charlie.

Once Castiel has calmed himself, he goes to Charlie’s sound system setup and fiddles with the iPod connected until he comes across AC/DC. He wanders back to the couch and plops himself down on the cushions and smiles a little at the living room around them. He’s not as nervous as he was earlier, and perhaps he has Gabriel to thank for that. Instead, he sits back on the soft couch and listens to Dean’s music playing softly around him and pulls out his phone.

*I am very excited for tonight.*
Dean’s a fast texter. Castiel knows this and only a few seconds tick by before his phone vibrates in the palm of his hand. Me too Cas. What time am I picking you up?!

*I was thinking that since it is your birthday, I should pick you up.*

Oh. Ok. But don’t think this gets you out of getting me a gift :)

*Of course not, Dean.*

What time should I be ready?

omg. Don’t tell anyone I said that. Especially Jo

*Why not?*

I sounded like a chick on her way to the prom and she’s already questioning my manly man-ness

Castiel laughs at that and taps out a speedy reply. *Well, what time should I meet you at your house? (Is that better?)*

Don’t ever change Cas.

Is 8 good?

*8:00 is perfect, Dean.*

I’ll be waiting.

*Imagine me saying that really sexy. And naked.*

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Gabe’s car is a piece of crap. He drives like a bat out of hell and plows right over speed bumps and pot holes fast enough that Dean worries that one day he’s going to leave half of his car behind and not realize it. Momentum will just keep it going on because Gabe’s lucky like that.

Cas on the other hand drives with his back ramrod straight and his hands carefully placed on ten and two. If it was anyone else, Dean would roll his eyes but with Cas, it’s kind of adorable. He takes turns slowly and carefully and actually drives the speed limit. The only other person Dean knows that does that is Sam and that’s exactly why Sam never drives Baby. Being cautious is one thing. Driving like a grandma is annoying. But…it’s Cas and Dean can’t help but smile at the thought.

“What have you done so far today, Dean?”

“Jo and my Aunt Ellen and Uncle Bobby showed up this morning with breakfast and Jo was a general pain-in-the-ass and Ellen and Bobby were parental. Got a sweet tool kit. Maybe Gabe’ll let me use it to tune this sucker up one of these days.”
"You do all the repairs on your car?"

"Oh, yeah. No one touches Baby but me. Not even my Dad gets under her hood."

"I am glad you two are so committed to one another."

"You got nothing to be jealous of, Cas. Promise."

"I’m glad."

"Where are we headed, anyway?" Dean takes his first opportunity to actually pay attention to where they’re going and peers out the passenger window. It’s only a little after 8:00 but it’s still January and they’re still in Kansas so the sun set hours ago. The headlights of Gabe’s Honda illuminate the path that Dean recognized as being on the way to Charlie’s house.

"It’s a surprise? We’ll be there soon."

Dean set back in the seat of the Honda and exhaled. "You’re a pretty good birthday present, Cas. You know that?"

Cas chuckled low in his throat and Dean smiled at the sound. "No, I did not. But thank you, Dean."

When they pulled up to Charlie’s house, Dean eyed Castiel suspiciously before they exited the car. "What’s going on here, Cas?"

They emerged from the car and Dean tightening the collar of his leather jacket around himself against a strong wind. "Why are we at Charlie’s place?"

"Come on, Dean." Castiel urged. In the heat of the moment, he extended his hand out to the other boy who reached out and interlaced their fingers. They walked up to the door and Castiel turned the knob. Inside, Jo, Sam, Charlie, and Gabriel all stood around the coffee table where a cake sat with 18 glistening candles and yelled, "Happy birthday, Dean!"

"And don’t think we forgot the pie, dude. The cake’s mostly for show." Sam took long strides to the kitchen and re-emerged soon after with a bakery box in hand. "It’s apple; your favorite." Sam smiled widely, dimples highlighting his face. Behind him, the others smiled warmly, too, and Castiel turned his gaze back to Dean.

Dean still hadn’t said anything. Instead, he just stood stock still, his lips parted and his hand tightened around Castiel’s. After a beat, he licked his lips and swallow. Castiel tracked the movement of his Adam’s apple with hungry eyes but willed himself to focus when Dean’s voice broke through the silence. "Holy shit. Seriously, guys?"

"Surprise." Castiel said, lips quirked into a grin.
“Are you crying, Dean?” Gabriel asked. Dean blinked the traces of his tears away and smiled widely and Castiel felt he had never seen such a beautiful sight.

“You guys, this is really awesome. Really.”

“Just because you forgot your own birthday doesn’t mean we did.” Sam remarked, setting the pie down beside the cake and stepping forward. He pulled Dean into a hug and whispered something in his ear that Castiel couldn’t hear. When they broke apart, Dean eyes shone once again and he clapped Sam heartily on the shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah. You, too, Samsquatch.”

“Ok! Enough with the water works ladies, let’s get on with this party!”

“I agree with the redhead!” Jo called.

“But there’s something you two,” Charlie remarked, eyes locked onto Dean and Castiel, “have to see first. Come on. It’s Birthday Surprise Number 2.” She grabbed both their hands and led them to the kitchen and through the patio doors. Out on the deck, Christmas lights were strung and woven and twinkled overhead. Two plush chairs were pulled closely together under the warmth of a small, portable fire pit. “And there’s one more thing!” Charlie darted off into the kitchen and Castiel stared at the scene around him in amazement. Dean was struck speechless again but his eyes trained back on Charlie when she bounded back out onto the deck with two take-out containers and cans of pop.

“Is that--?”

“Yup. Two cheeseburgers from The Roadhouse courtesy of Jo – “

“You’re welcome!!”

“...and two colas courtesy of me. If you want Cas, Gabe brought beers but Sam mentioned that Dean doesn’t drink I just brought these instead. Don’t just stand there looking goofy all day, Dean.”

“Right.” Dean nodded to himself and took the containers from Charlie.

“You guys can come back in when you can’t feel your toes anymore. Have fun!”

Dean blinked over at Castiel and he felt his insides clench under his gaze. “This – this is amazing, Cas.”

They both moved to sit in the chairs near the fire pit and Castiel leaned in and pressed his lips to Dean’s. “Happy birthday, Dean.”

Chapter End Notes

I am dying to write some serious angst for this story!!
Hope you enjoyed.
They finished their meal in companionable silence, broken only by the occasional moans over their burgers. Every other bite or so, Dean tore his gaze away from the flames in the fire pit and sent Cas a small grin that was answered by a smile from the other boy.

“I still can’t believe you guys planned this.” Dean said, swallowing the last bite of a French fry. “When’d you get the time?”

“You never being on time to lunch made it fairly easy.”

Dean huffed a laugh and shifted up a bit in his chair to sit closer to Cas. Their knees are pressed tightly together and he reveled in the warmth of Cas’s body. “Glad to know that my tardiness is good for something other than detention.”

Cas seemed to take the hint and pressed closer to Dean as well. “Well, I cannot take credit for this,” he extends a hand, gesturing to the fire pit before them and the lights strung above. “This was all Charlie’s doing.”

“Huh. Well, so far, this has been the best birthday I’ve had in a while. And that has just about everything to do with who I get to spend it with this year. So, thank you, Cas.”

Under the glow of the lights and the fire, Dean watched as color crept up Cas’s cheeks and wondered how much it had to do with the cold. “May I ask you a question?”

“Sure, shoot.”

“How is it that you manage to forget your birthday two years in a row?” For the first time since they sat down, Dean turned and faced Cas, looking him hard in the eye. Dean swallowed the rush of desire in him when he takes in Cas’s ocean-blue eyes and that always-messy head of hair and instead searched his eyes for a hint of mocking that he got from Jo and Sam and Bobby earlier in the day. When he sees none of that there, only genuine curiosity, he nods slowly to himself before speaking.

“For a long time, birthdays weren’t a thing for us – me, Sammy and our dad. Ellen and Bobby tried whenever they could, but for a few years when we were kids, we were on the road a lot and they couldn’t always track us down. But,” Dean shrugs, “when Bobby finally managed to drag us and Dad back here, things got better for a while and…then they went to shit again.” Dean sighs and runs a hand down his face. “Sorry. That was depressing.”

Cas just shakes his head and reaches out a hand for Dean’s. “No, it wasn’t. I hope that this year will be a new tradition for you, then. Give you a reason to remember why January 24th is important.”

“I have a question for you now.”
“Alright.”

“Why do you live with Gabe and Anna?”

“Oh.”

“Sorry, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“No. That’s not it at all. It’s just not that interesting of a story. My parents are religious scholars. They travel a great deal and for a long time, I was homeschooled and then sent to boarding school. That place, though, was insufferable. I knew I hated it my first day but I didn’t really understand why. I was allowed to visit Gabriel and Anna one summer here in Lawrence and I very much enjoyed it. Not simply the town, though, the people. And I managed to convince my parents to allow me to attend school there and I was able to live with Gabriel and Anna to do so.

I…have no siblings and my parents and I do not speak often. Anna and Gabriel are not close with their parents, either. They’re the only family that I have, really. It’s nice, just the three of us. They have been very welcoming.”

“Even if Gabe’s a pain in the ass?”

Cas smiled and Dean reached out a hand to stroke the other boy’s cheek. “Yes, even if he’s a massive pain in the ass. And I was able to come to meet you here. So, it appears to have worked out for the best.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” Dean leaned forward, seeking out Cas for another kiss.

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When he heard Dean let out a moan against his lips, Castiel made no attempt to resist the urge to bring up a hand to cup Dean’s face. The other hand sought out the back of his neck and he pulled Dean closer. They pulled apart briefly for breath and Dean smiled at him, green eyes twinkling under the lights.

A breeze blew and the faint traces of snow that remained on the ground stirred. Dean pulled back slightly before moving to slide into the seat with Castiel. He pressed kisses to Castiel’s neck and he arched his neck for more exposure. “It’s a little cold out here,” he said, pulling back a bit. “And you’re so warm.” He pushed his face once again to Castiel’s neck and sucked on the sensitive skin underneath his ear. Castiel sucked in a harsh breath at the sensation, god.

“Ah. You’re more than welcome to join me. It, ahem, would be a pity for you to take ill on your birthday.”

“It’d be a cryin’ shame, Cas.” They stayed like that for a moment longer, Dean holding firmly to his warmth with his face pressed into the crook of his neck, as the fire pit flickered under the winter breeze. “You smell good.”

Wordlessly, Castiel pulled his arms around Dean and Dean’s arms locked tightly around him. “Never thought I’d end up with a boyfriend as my birthday present.” Dean murmured. His breath was warm against the skin of Castiel’s neck and he shivered at Dean’s words. Boyfriend. A smile
he brought a hand up to card through Dean’s hair.

“Is it a good present, Dean?”

He felt the other boy nod against his shoulder. “Hmmm,” he hummed. “A great present.”

“Then I am glad.” After a beat, “do you think there’s any cake left?”

Dean laughed and pulled away after a swift peck on the lips. “God, I hope not. But if they ate all my pie, there’s gonna be hell to pay.” It was Cas’s turn to laugh now as he stood and reached for Dean’s hand.

“It’s getting cold out. Let’s go back inside.”

“Yeah,” Dean replied with a nod. “It’d suck ass to get sick after all this.”

When they shrug off their coats and rejoin the group with their hands clasped together and fingers intertwined, they are greeted with the sight of Charlie and Sam sitting rigidly on the couch, PS4 controllers gripped tightly in their hands and the sounds of gunfire blaring from the TV, talking loudly at one another.

“What the hell!!” Charlie shrieked. “You are so going down, Winchester!”

“Like hell I am!” Sam hissed.

Jo is sprawled on the love seat with Gabriel on the floor with a plate of cookies within arms’ reach for the both of them.

“Well, ain’t this cute?”

They all jerk up at the sound of Dean’s voice and turn to face them. The television is paused and Jo and Gabe abandon the plate of chocolate chip cookies. Their gazes flicker down to their interlocked hands and Gabe hoots. “Hot damn! I called this weeks ago.”

“Yeah, you should’ve put money on it.”  Gabe’s eyes widen at Dean’s comment.

“Shit, you’re right.”

Dean is usually a private guy who has his fair share of secrets in his closet, but this is something that he isn’t ashamed of like with just about everything else. The people scattered across Charlie’s living room are his family – the best friends he could ever ask for – and he wants them to know that right here and now, he’s the happiest he can ever remember being and it’s mostly their doing. His thought is interrupted by the chirping alarm of his watch and he curses internally. He catches Sam’s eye as he goes to silence the alarm, finally relinquishing his hold of Cas’s hand.

“Curfew again?” Cas says quietly at his side.

“Uh, yeah. It’s nothing though – Dad’s out of town and it’s the weekend,” he pauses and his eyes go to Sam’s again, who nods in understand.

“Come on, Dean. Let’s go get the pie and ice cream.” Dean nods absently before he steps forward
and kisses Cas’s cheek. Charlie all but squeals from her seat and Cas’s face heats.

Dean sighs when they cross the threshold into the kitchen. He knows what’s coming before Sam can even open his mouth, so he reaches in the cabinets for a glass and fills it with water from the tap.

“You got your pills?”

“Yes, Sam.” Dean pulls out three pills from his pocket and tosses them into his mouth before swallowing them down with a mouthful of lukewarm tap water. He grimaces at the taste before rounding to lean against the sink to face Sam.

“It’s cold out tonight.”

“Yes, Sam.”

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Sam. We were outside for an hour. It’s fine.”

“It’s not ‘fine,’ Dean. You just got over that cough and – “

“Stop it, Sammy. Stop. I took the damn pills and I don’t want to hear anything else about it. Please.” Dean’s voice dropped to a near whisper and Sam opened his mouth, like he wanted to continue, but simply nodded instead. “Great.”

“I don’t want to be ‘that guy’ right now, I’m just worried about you. This is a great night and I’m so happy for you and Cas, and I don’t want anything to mess that up for you. You deserve to be happy more than anyone else I know. I love you.”

“I know, Sammy. I appreciate it, y’know, it’s just – “

“It’s a little bit of a downer, yeah.” Sam exhales and fidgets with the pie on the table in front of it. “So..” Sam manages to look everywhere but at Dean when he’s lying, it’s been his tell for as long as he can remember and it’s why he’s crap at poker, so when his eyes skit all over the kitchen before focusing squarely on the apple pie in front of him, Dean knows that something is up. “Jess and I have been a couple for a while and we talk about everything, y’know?”

“Is this going anywhere, Samantha?”

Sam sighs and rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “Ok, well, I maybe told her that you and Cas were, like, five minutes away from becoming a thing. She may have gotten really excited by the idea and made me promise that I’d talk you guys into going on a double date sometime.”

Dean can feel his eyes widen almost comically before he tosses his head back and laughs loudly. Dean grabs a stack of plates, a handful of forks and a knife before heading towards the living room, still laughing. “No. Fuck, no, Sammy. “

“Yeah, figured as much.”

“Dean-o! What in the hell is so funny?”

“Stuff it, Gabe!”
The rest of the night is spent gorging themselves on so many sweets, Castiel wonders whether it’s possible to get diabetes in a single night. When he says as much to Charlie, she shushes him before sliding over another slice of cake that he ultimately accepts.

It’s two in the morning when he, along with anyone else still awake, feels the night draw to a close. Jo has once again claimed the love seat for herself, Gabriel’s fallen hard from his sugar high while Charlie and Sam bicker again, albeit quieter this time, over he iPad that she’s using to control the music. The person pressed up beside him, however, is what grabs and holds on to his attention more than the DVD start menu that’s been playing on a loop for the past fifteen minutes, or Gabriel’s snoring, or Sam and Charlie’s equally questionable tastes in music. Dean is warm and solid and perfect next to him. His head is resting on Castiel’s shoulder and he snores softly, completely unaware of anything happening around him. His face is lax with sleep and plump lips are parted as he breathes evenly and peacefully. The hand on his knee tethers Castiel down to Earth where this is real and this is happening, where Dean is his and he’s Dean’s.

Castiel never before saw himself as the romantic sort, never saw himself as someone that would have a group of friends that he’d want to spend his nights with, but Lawrence, Kansas is making him re-evaluate all of that. He was never aware of how lonely he had been until he found a new family to fill the void of the one he never really had. Dean sighs in his sleep and Castiel just smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Forgive any and all typos. I suck at proofreading.

I hope you enjoyed it. The calm (fluff) before the storm (sick!Dean angst!).

Comments/review, kudos, bookmarks and subscriptions are all appreciated.
Dean looks exhausted. Sam noted his eyes eye lids dropping further and further after the last slice of pie disappeared and when he slants his gaze over to his brother, dosing peaceful on Cas’s shoulder while the other boy’s head rests against the back of the couch, he decides it’s time to head back home. He nudges Charlie with his sock-covered foot and jerks his chin over towards the corner of the couch that Dean and Cas occupy. Jo and Gabriel appear to be asleep as well, but Charlie simply sits under the glow of the television flipping through the hundred-and-one channels in her HBO package before glancing over at Dean and standing to give Sam a hug good-bye.

“See ya later, Charlie.”

“Yup.”

Waking Dean is a process that has always been made more difficult when there is no coffee to wave under his nose. Sam decides to delay the process and goes to step into his boots by the door and shrug on his coat and grabbing Dean’s before he makes a move to rouse him.

“Dean,” he whispers. “Come on, dude. It’s time to head out.” He shakes Dean’s shoulder softly in an attempt to not disturb Castiel, who only snores a bit louder at the movement.

“Humph.” Instead of making a move to get up, his brother seems to only bury himself in deeper into the couch cushions and Castiel, so Sam tries another approach.

“Dean, man, I’m so sorry,” he whispers, “but I think someone just scratched the Impala.” At that, Dean’s eyes fly open and Sam just manages to stifle his laughter. Charlie, on the other hand, is Dean’s best friend for a reason – and it’s clearly their mutual lack of shame. From her seat on the floor, she laughs quietly as Dean all but jumps from his spot on the couch to make a move to snatch his leather jacket away from Sam.

“The fuck are we still standing here for?” Dean’s voice is a harsh growl and no traces of the peaceful, sleeping Dean remains. If someone had actually nicked the Impala, Sam would be seriously concerned for their wellbeing right now. “Sammy, if some fucker hit Baby – “ Dean must read something in Sam’s face because the way his eyes go from cartoon-wide to slits is almost frightening. “Are you fucking with me?”

“It was the only way to wake you up. Dude, you sleep like the fucking dead.” Dean ignores Sam and brushes past him towards the door.

“Call you later, Charlie.”

“Damn straight you will. Love you!”

“I know.”
The door closes behind them and Sam makes a move to grab the car keys from Dean. Despite his previous alertness, he’s yawning and scrunching up his face like an irritable toddler against the cold, early-morning air. The sun hasn’t even come up yet but the road ways are illuminated by an increasingly thickening blanket of snow that’s been falling off and on all night. “I’m driving, Dean. No arguments.” When he was young and bitter with their father and life in general, Sam hated the way they fought like cats and dogs. Dean always said it was because they were so similar and draws on that now – that distinctive tone of voice, of John, that says there’s no room for argument.

Dean only nods before sliding into the passenger seat and promptly dozing back off as the car starts up with its familiar roar.

Sam’s an early riser, always has been, and so he goes to the kitchen and starts to prepare pancakes for breakfast. On the kitchen counter beside him is the rumbled paper bag their father had given him before he took off for another gig. His eyes anxiously go back to it every now and again while he’s stirring the batter or flipping the pancakes as he wonders how Dean will react to the present. It’s a combined gift, from him and their father, that he hopes Dean’ll like because…well, just because. His brother’s a jerk more days than not and can be a royal asshole when he wants to be, but he’s still his brother. The brother that he almost lost not all that long ago.

The coffee pot chirps and, just like that, Dean’s bedroom door creaks open from upstairs and Sam smiles because it never fails.

“Mornin’, sunshine.” He chirps happily and Dean simply grunts. He’s in his boxers and a t-shirt and his hair’s sticking up every which way. At the first sip of coffee, Dean looks slightly more human and Sam forces himself to stop standing around hovering, but if he’s going to do this, it has to be now. Dean’s loathe to admit anything having to do with his feelings or emotions, heaven forbid, so he’s got to attack now while he’s most vulnerable – before he’s finished his first cup of coffee.

“I didn’t get a chance to give you your present yesterday.”

“Sam, you don’t have to get me anything. That party? It was awesome enough.” Dean’s lucid faster than Sam would’ve expected. He’s got to speed this along before Dean tries to run off and Sam has to sit on him to make him listen.

“Yeah, I figured you’d say that. But, Dad and I got this for you a little while ago and,” Sam moves from their small kitchen table to the counter to make a grab for the paper bag and sits back down. “Well, it’s not like we can exactly return it.”

Dean sets the mug down on the table, eyeing the package, then Sam, then the package again.

“You and Dad?”

Sam nods. “Surprise?” When Dean continues to stare at the bag like it’s a bomb waiting to go off, Sam slides it over closer, “Come on, dude. Just open it. You’ll like it.”

Dean relents, grabbing the bag and opening it. Before he can finish sliding out the gift inside, his eyes go soft and his shoulders hunch inward. Once removed out of the bag, the picture frame seems to glisten under the lights in the kitchen and it’s all the more fitting. The picture it holds is an old one but Sam knows that Dean remembers it by the way his eyes glisten over.
It’s Mom.

She’s smiling for the camera, soft blonde hair cascading down her shoulders carrying his younger self and a small Dean in each arm in their bedroom of their old house. They’re all laughing at something and grinning happily towards the camera as John takes the picture. Sam doesn’t remember much about their mom and Dean’s only a year older, so he knows he doesn’t either, but Dean has a different relationship with the past than Sam does. Sam grieved for his mother, and still misses her some days like a dull ache in his chest. But he remembers when Dean was sick and sure he was dying (but trying not to let on), he’d ask questions about Mary to Ellen and Bobby, before finally asking John. Sam pushes the thought aside. Dean’s here and another year older and healthier than he’s been in a long time. That’s his focus right now.

“H-how? How’d you manage to find this?”

“That part was all Dad. I don’t really know and he wasn’t very forthcoming so I didn’t push.”

Dean only nods, his eyes locked on the picture in his hands. “I made a copy for me, too. It’s in my wallet. Dad’s got one, too, but…you know.”

Dean runs his free hand down his face and gives Sam a watery smile. “Thanks, Sammy.”

“Yup.”

Chapter End Notes

Super, super short chapter. Just wanted some time for the brothers to be brotherly together in a completely emotionally healthy instead of tragically co-dependent kinda way.

(Forgive the typos. It’s, like, 1:30AM here and...yeah. My bad.)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I apologize that this didn't fall on my unofficial Sunday Update Day!! I've made this chapter a bit lengthy just to get a lot more of Dean's POV in because when shit gets real, it's going to come a bit more from Cas's.

I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Dean’s alarm clock blares at him to wake up, he rolls over with a grunt and slams a hand over it to shut it off. He blinks blearily at the faint traces of sunlight that cascade into his darkened bedroom before his eyes adjust to the light. The sight in front of the alarm clock makes his smile, though, despite his early-morning grogginess (although 7AM isn’t considered by many to be that early but to Dean? It’s bullshit.). It’s the picture his father and brother got him for his birthday and his grins like a moron at it, whispering ‘good morning, Mom,’ like she can hear him through the glass of the frame and time and respond in kind with a soft and loving caress of his cheek. His phone chirps and he sees a text message that he missed the day before and it’s from John:

hey kiddo. couldn’t get a chance to call for your bday. sorry – will call tonight

“Huh.” Dean rubs at his chest, a tick he can’t seem to shake for very long, and ignores the feel of guilt weighing in his stomach as he rolls out of bed to get dressed for school. He hadn’t even realized his father had not called (or sent a text) this past weekend and it was still as close to perfect as Dean could imagine – being with Sammy, and Cas, Jo, Charlie, and even Gabe. Kissing Cas and having Cas kiss back. And, of course, the present from Sam. Although, John had as much to do with that as Sam but…still.

If Sam knew that he hadn’t heard from John, he’d complain and complain and complain about how it isn’t okay for a father to forget their kids’ birthdays. But Dean just can’t let himself be mad at John about anything related to his work and Sam doesn’t seem to understand that. He’s the reason that John is so far away for so long and even if his Dad tells him that it was his choice to take the driving gig, Dean knows with absolute certainty that if he hadn’t gotten sick, John wouldn’t have taken the job that an old Marine buddy offered because of the health insurance and bump in pay. Before that, before things got really bad and Dean only need expensive-ass prescriptions instead of an operation (and, more expensive-ass prescriptions) working for Bobby had been enough. But now it just isn’t an option anymore. He lets out a sigh that turns into a cough before shaking his head at the thought, before pulling on a pair of ratty jeans.

Sam’s at some boring-ass debate club meeting (and why they have their meetings at the ass-crack of dawn is beyond him) so Dean’s alone in the morning when he trudges into the kitchen. He swallows back his morning meds while he’s there and adds a fizzy Vitamin C tablet to his routine to fight at the scratchiness he feels clawing in the back of his throat and that cough that doesn’t seem to stay gone for very long.

He’s out of the house soon after and sliding into the cool leather seats of the Impala. Dean coos at the car for a bit, waiting for it to warm up and for the light dusting of snow over it to melt away.
‘Ramble On’ starts up on the cassette tape.

“Oh, yeah.” Dean laughs. “Good going, Girl. Just what I needed to start my morning.”

Castiel waits for Dean on Monday morning at his locker. When he sees his blonde hair and bright green eyes above a sea of students squeezing in through the front doors of the school, he gives a small smile that widens with Dean’s answering grin. Dean takes determined and wide strides to get to his locker and cups a cold hand over the back of Castiel’s neck to stroke the fine hairs there.

“Hey, Cas.” He says with a smile.

Castiel swallows. “Hello, Dean.”

Dean releases his hold of Castiel to open his locker. “Dean,” he calls after a moment, “may I speak with you about something?”

Surprised green eyes find him and Dean pulls himself away from the locker and nods an affirmative. “Sure, Cas. Shoot. Everything okay?”

“Yes, well, I’m not sure.” Castiel can feel himself blushing. He darts his eyes away from Dean’s to look at the energy of the student body humming around them before his eyes finally land on the floor. “I just didn’t…” Castiel sighs, pulls himself to full height, still shorter than Dean, and forces himself to make eye contact. “Are you…out?”

Dean blinks and is silent. Castiel nods before ducking his head again in an attempt to hide his hurt. He thinks back to his time at boarding school where he’d known plenty of boys that were securely tucked away in the closet and saw firsthand what a horrid experience it was. He made the decision not long after he first accepted who he was and who he liked that that was a life that was not for him and, as much as he’s come to care for the other boy, he won’t relegate himself to that for anyone. Dean’s locker slams shut and Castiel is already turning away when he feels Dean’s grip, solid and firm, around his arm pulling him into the center of the hallway. Castiel looks up and Dean places a warm hand on his cheek before letting their lips touch. He swallows Castiel’s shocked gasp and darts his tongue inside for a quick taste before the he pulls away at the answering catcalls and whistles around them.

When Castiel looks to Dean’s face, his eyes sparkle with mischief and his lip is curled in his trademark smirk. “That answer your question?”

Castiel can only nod dumbly at Dean who tosses his head back and laughs. Once he’s more composed, he simply grabs Castiel’s hand while they walk to class.

When Henrickson walks in to the room with a stack of graded homework assignments in his arm,
Dean blinks. *Shit.* He forgot about their arrangement. It’s Monday and after class, he’s going to want to talk about Dean’s essay and…*shit.* He sighs and runs a hand through his hair and that seems to catch Henrickson’s attention, who only arches a knowing eyebrow at Dean before returning the problem sets to the rest of the class.

Time in class ticks by agonizingly slow for Dean, who feels himself growing more restless the more time drags on. Beside him, Cas is being the model student, taking notes and being attentive and actually looking like he gives a damn about what Henrickson’s talking about and Dean stopped giving a *sh*t* the minute he realized that he needs to go track down Chuck and the auto mechanics teacher to pick up his letters of recommendation during his lunch period. It’s a good thing that Dean’s so far ahead in this class or he’d be freaking out that he can’t seem to focus for the life of him.

*Shit.*

Class finally ends and Dean lets out a breath. Cas starts to pack up his belongings and Dean just drums out the bass line of ‘Ramble On’ while he waits for the rest of class to trickle out. When Cas has slung his bookbag over his shoulder, Dean reaches out and grabs his hand again.

“I’m not gonna be at lunch today. Meet me by the Impala after school?”

Cas rubs his thumb over Dean’s knuckles and the feeling sends a thrill up Dean’s spine. “Of course, Dean.”

“Great. See ya later, Cas.”

The short walk from his desk towards the back of the classroom to Henrickson’s desk feels like Dean’s marching to his own execution. He’s tense and nervous and Henrickson, being Henrickson, doesn’t even glance up in his general direction until Dean stops dead in front of the desk and starts squirming.

“Mr. Winchester.”

“Mr. Henrickson.”

“Did you need to talk to me about something?”

Dean’s heart stops in his chest (and given his history, he should really stop thinking things like that). “Uh, I thought – you said you were gonna read my essay over the weekend and, well, that we’d talk about it Monday. Uh, today. Sir.”

“Did I?” Henrickson finally breaks his gaze on his iPhone to look up at Dean and Dean is stunned into silence. Then, Henrickson, the bastard, starts to laugh and if he were any kid in the parking lot, Dean would’ve laid him out on principle alone.

“Dude.”

“I saw your face this morning when I came into class and I thought you were going to puke all over your desk. I’m sorry, but I couldn’t resist.”

“I thought you’re supposed to get more mature with age or something.” Dean mutters.
“Yeah, well, guess you thought wrong, eh?”

“It’s in poor taste to freak the kid out with the tricky heart-thing.”

“You didn’t seem all that concerned about your ‘tricky heart-thing’ when you were macking on Mr. Milton this morning.”

Oh. Well, shit. “Uh, you saw that?”

“I think half the school did. I’m inclined to think that was the point?”

“…maybe.”

Henrickson sighs and Dean readies himself for the fight that he feels brewing. “Look, Winchester, I told you before that I like you a lot so listen to me, yeah? You and I aren’t all that different.” When Dean raises a brow in disbelief, Mr. Henrickson continues, “My old man was in the military – Air Force – and I signed up as soon as I turned 18. Following in his footsteps, y’know? So I get that compulsion you have with the jacket and the muscle car that both have at least a decade on you. I was the freaky math whiz kid when I was your age, too. And between the two of us, David – that’s my partner – he and I have been together for going on eight years or so now. So trust me, I get a lot of where you’re coming from. I may be a little older and darker than you, with a little less hair and medical drama, but I get it. Ok?”

Dean can’t seem to muster any words to respond to that so he just nods mutely. Henrickson, up until this semester, was pretty much the bane of his existence. He doesn’t take any crap from anybody and is one of the few teachers at Lawrence High who doesn’t seem to fall for the most charming smile Dean can pull out of his ass when his feet are held to the fire. The more he’s interacted with the man, though, the more he seems to actually be human and less of a dickhead alien sent to screw over a room full of teenagers to get his rocks off. The thought that Dean actually kinda sorta likes Henrickson is jarring, as is the knowledge that they have more in common than Dean would’ve ever thought possible. It’s strangely reassuring in a way.

“So about your essay. I read over it a few times this weekend,” Henrickson starts, pulling out the pages of notebook paper with the torn seriated edges, from his desk, “and I think it’s actually really good. Granted, you can’t seem to use a comma consistently if your life depended on it, but it’s definitely one of the better ones I’ve read this year. It’s for MIT, right?”

Dean stares at the pages on Henrickson’s hand and tries to read to squiggly red writing over the pages and is jerked from his attempts when Henrickson stops talking. He clears his throat, trying to get rid of that annoying tickle that won’t seem to go away and nods again. “Uh, yeah. KSU doesn’t require an essay and my ACT scores were high enough in English that I don’t need an essay for the other schools. This is all there is.”

“And did you ask for two more letters?”

“From Chuck and Mr. Davis, yeah. They said they’d put a rush on them for my ‘extenuating circumstances’ so I could come get them today.”

“That’s perfect, actually.”

“How so?”

“I’m pretty sure you and I have the same lunch period, Dean, and I just so happen to have my laptop here with me today along with a stamped envelope that’s addressed to that fancy-ass school in Boston. So, if you wouldn’t mind ditching out on lunch with your boyfriend and brother, I thought we could get around to sending this out today. If you’re ready, that is.”
“You, uh, think that it’s ready to go out today? I don’t even know if Chuck or Davis have everything that I need and – “ Dean was silenced with a Henrickson’s raised hand.

“Kid, this essay is damned good. If you’re going to really do this, there’s no better time than doing it now. I take it your brother and father don’t know about this? What better way to surprise them than with your acceptance letter to fuc-freaking MIT?”

_Holy shit_, Dean realizes. Henrickson is serious. If this man has his way, Dean will be just that much closer to Boston and MIT and all that fancy-ass swank of cinderblock college dorm rooms and Ramen noodles and cheap-as-shit beer (that he can’t even drink anyway…). Dean’s stared death in the face before he even had his freaking driver’s license. He can do this. He totally can. No problem. Nope.

“S-sure,” he finally replies and he grunts internally at the stutter. It doesn’t seem to phase Henrickson who is up and moving through his desk to pull out a laptop and place it on his desk before Dean.

“You and I got the same lunch period, yeah?” When Dean just nods, eyes fixed to the computer in front of him, Henrickson continues. “Great. I don’t have a class this period, obviously, and you’re pretty late for…”

“World History,” Dean finishes, clearing his throat.

“Great, great. Everything you’re gonna be talking about already happened hundreds of years ago, right? Missing a class today in the grand scheme of things won’t hurt much since I’m assuming you’re ahead in that class, too. Go down to see Mr. Shurley and get that letter from him before he gets swamped doing whatever it is that man does and then go see Mr. Davis, alright? Grab some food from the cafeteria if you think you’re gonna be hungry and just bring it up here so we can at least get this one ball rolling.”

“Ok,” Dean says quietly because, _holy shit_, this is a lot. He can’t even think about food right now and that thought alone would be terrifying if he wasn’t actually about to do something for his future. And Henrickson’s staring at him all earnest and hopeful and Dean wants to swallow up every bad word he’s ever said about the guy because this…is awesome.

When Dean finally emerges from Chuck’s office thirty minutes after sitting down and hearing the door click shut in the behind him, it’s to an empty hallway with his sealed letter is clutched in Dean’s hand that just won’t seem to stop shaking with anxiety. He lets out a cough that seems to echo in the silence and stillness of the hall where no one is even trickling into the bathrooms or water fountain. He’s still got time to make it to Mr. Davis before his third period class, so he takes advantage of the vacant hallway and pulls out his phone to send a text to Cas.

_Hey. just letting you know that I wont be at lunch today. Something came up._

He should feel bad about being this evasive to Cas and even worse in that this is the most information about his plans that he’s really given to anyone, and that includes Sam, but he can’t really get anyone else’s hopes up when he’s still so unsure and doubtful about everything. Although, Henrickson seems to have enough faith in Dean for the both of them and that’s a strange thought when he considers how much he hated the man’s guts while he was working out problem sets all day when he was too weak to do anything other than sleep.

Dean and Cas have never texted each other in class before and he knows what kind of student Cas
is…serious and focused with that unwavering blue-eyed stare – so when his phone buzzes in his pocket while he’s leaning against the lockers, he’s surprised to find that the message is a reply from Cas.

*Alright. Is everything okay?*

*Yeah everything’s fine. Just gotta talk to Henrickson for a bit*

*Would you like me to still meet you by your car after school, then?*

*Yeah Cas. I’d like that a whole helluva lot*

*Perfect. Goodbye, Dean.* Dean smiles a little at the reply before stuffing his phone back into the front pocket of his jeans and strolling down the hallway to Mr. Davis’s classroom.

When the bell for lunch rings, Dean is out of his seat and barreling down the hall for Henrickson’s room before his teacher has even finished talking. He makes no move or attempt to even entertain the idea getting food – the idea of it just acting to stir up more nausea at the idea of what he’s about to do. As if on autopilot, Dean walks to Henrickson’s room as he’s cleaning off the chalkboard and goes to the seat where the laptop is already set up and Dean’s essay rests on top of the keyboard.

“You read over my comments and let me know what you think, yeah?”

“Sure.” Dean reads over the three-page essay three times and focuses on the red markings that tell him where he’s missed a coma, spelled something wrong or needs to clarify. Even if he incorporates all of Henrickson’s comments, the essay is still 100% his. The syntax is cleaner, but the essence of it is still Dean and he sighs in relief. He reads over the prompt again (“Describe the world you come from; for example, your family, clubs, school, community, city or town. How has that world shaped your dreams and aspirations,”) and starts to type.

The rest of his lunch period passes by too fast in Dean’s opinion. He still has fifteen minutes left before he needs to get to his next class, but when he’s done typing up the essay, he looks up to find Henrickson watching him intently.

“You alright?”

“Yeah,” Dean replies hesitantly. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“It’s just you’re looking a little pale there.”

“Yeah, well, all of this is just…freaking me out, y’know? It’s surreal.”

Henrickson nods. “Yeah, I get that. I really do, kid. You about done there?”

“So, what? Do I just click ‘submit’ now and wait?”

“Pretty much. I mean, there’s still the letters you’ve got to mail off, but there’s a mailbox right outside and I can take care of that.”
“You’d actually do that?”

“I have a feeling that if I didn’t, you probably would chicken out. Or forget.”

“I wouldn’t forget!”

Henrickson just smirks and wonders back to his desk to pull out a folder and walks over to where Dean still sits at the desk. “Got some more problem sets,” he says, “these should be a little trickier than your last batch. Just to make sure you don’t get rusty before you head off to that fancy east-coast college.”

“I applied, like, five seconds ago, dude. Don’t you think you’re jumping the gun there?”

“Not even a little bit. Take a look at these when you get a chance. There’s no real hurry.”

Dean sighs and the exhalation stirs up another cough and it’s getting pretty fucking annoying at this point. “Alright.”

Henrickson turns an assessing stare on Dean and looks at him so intently that Dean squirms under his gaze. “You sure you’re feeling alright?” When Dean nods, Henrickson looks at him skeptically before nodding almost imperceptibly to himself. “If you say so. Now get out of here. I gotta lock up and make a run to that mailbox before my next class starts.”

Dean spends the rest of the day feeling as numb as he ever has in a long time. The remaining classes in the day all blur by in a rush and he doesn’t even realize that the day is over until he’s standing at his locker shrugging into his leather jacket. When he finally gets to the Impala, Cas is standing there with a smile stretched across his lips. His breath is coming out in huffs in the chill, winter air and his cheeks are pink from the wind. Dean grins broadly at the other boy as he makes his way before pulling him into a hug.

When they pull apart, Cas asks, “Was everything alright earlier today? Sam and Jo were curious about where you were during lunch.”

“Yeah, Henrickson and I had some stuff to work out but everything’s good now. Great, actually.”

“Good. I believe Sam said something along the lines of it had to have been very urgent and dire for you to miss out on food.”

“Dick,” Dean mutters. “So, listen, I wanted to ask you something. I know it’s last minute and all, but apparently Jess and Sam have some nerd project to work on for Model UN so they’re doing it at her place and I was wondering if you wanted to come over today? I can take you home later, maybe? We’ve got frozen pizza.”

The way Cas beams at Dean makes his chest swell with a feeling that he can’t really put a finger on. It’s something so different than he’s ever felt for another person, but it feels so familiar and warm when it settles that he hopes it never fades. “Are you inviting me over to your house to be alone with me, Dean?”

Dean blushes. He actually fucking blushes like a twelve year old girl. He can feel it in the way his face heats up but he simply grins in spite of it – or maybe because of it. The wind whips around them as they stand near the hood of the Impala and Dean leans against it as an anchor. “Damn straight I am, Cas.”

“Good. Let’s go.”
Castiel has only been in the Impala a handful of times but he finds himself already soothed by the sound that it makes when it roars to life. Dean speeds out of the parking lot a little faster than he would like but he still leans back into the still-cold leather of the passenger seats and smiles while Dean tinkers with the radio before he stuffs in a cassette tape that he’s never heard before.

It should be alarming that as strongly as he feels for Dean, he’s never seen his house and doesn’t know very much about Dean’s life outside of what the fact that his father is gone more often than he’s around, that he and Sam are as close as two siblings could possibly get, and that Dean has found a surrogate family that exists due to mutual feelings of love rather than biology. That, he knows for certain, is something they both have in common.

The Winchester home is not at all what Castiel was imagining. Castiel was born into a wealthy family and intellectually he knows that not everyone has been as fortunate as he has been in that regard, but Dean’s house is small. It’s hard to imagine that all the energy and personality and brilliance of Dean and his soul fitting into something smaller than an entire palace. But as it is, he lives in a two-story home with two bedrooms. At the end of Dean’s ‘tour’, Castiel asks, “So you and Sam have your own rooms but where does your father sleep?”

Dean blinks and for a second, Castiel worries that he’s asked the wrong question – that Dean will be offended by his inherent curiosity (his parents are researchers, after all) but Dean only grabs his hand to guide them back down the stairs and to the living room. “When Sam and I were younger, we shared a room but when my Dad had to take the job he has now, he wasn’t around all that much so when he is, he just takes the couch.”

“Ah.”

“I know that it isn’t much but we had to downsize not-too-long ago and –“

“Dean, relax. You not being wealthy isn’t going to make me not like you or want to spend time with you.”

“Yeah?” Dean’s smile is so brilliant that Castiel wishes there was a way for him to capture that light so he could always bask in it.

“Yeah.”

Not long after, Castiel finds himself and Dean sitting on opposite ends of a love seat in the living room but still close enough that Dean reaches over and strokes the fine hairs on the back of Castiel’s neck and he leans into the touch.

“This is becoming a bit reminiscent of what happened in the hall earlier today.”

“Yeah…sorry about that. It’s just that,” Dean shrugs but his fingers spread a comforting warmth down his skin. “You seemed so insecure, I guess, and I didn’t like being the one that made you feel like that.”
“You don’t have to apologize. It was a very open display, yes, more than I am used to but I did enjoy it and the sentiment.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I find that you are a very good kisser, Dean.”

Dean chuckles, “you aren’t so bad yourself.”

“Do you find this relationship strange?” Castiel all but blurts out into the silence that settles and his lack of tact should not be so surprising to himself at this point.

Dean’s finger still on his neck before he draws them away slowly. “Strange how?”

“I just meant that it seems a bit unconventional. Rushed, perhaps. Not that it’s a bad thing,” he rushes to add. “We haven’t known each other very long.”

Dean takes a while to respond and Castiel fears for the worst. “I think I’ve got a pretty good grasp on who you are.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, aside from what Gabe’s told me, I’ve been able to put some things together for myself.”

“Gabriel?! Dean…”

“Breathe, Cas.” Dean laughs. “Yeah, he’s told me some things about you after we met but that’s because he was so set on playing matchmaker. But what I’ve seen for myself is, I don’t know? More substantial?

You’re so smart that it’s scary. Seriously, you’re probably the smartest person I’ve ever met. I see all those nerdy books you’ve got stashed in your locker when you think I’m not looking. And you talk like someone crammed a dictionary in your head as a kid. It’s hot in a really strange way. You’re shy and awkward but it’s cute and charming. I haven’t met Anna yet but if your relationship with her is anything like the one you’ve got with Gabe, than you’re really lucky. Gabe’s a pain in the ass most days but you guys are a lot closer than I think you realize. Uhm, you tilt your head to the side and squint when you’re thinking about something too hard about something. And you hate the Mystery Meat in the cafeteria.”

“That last one is true for just about anyone.”

“Eh. Maybe. But the rest of what I said is pretty on point. Look, I know that I may not know your favorite food or most cherished childhood memory but we’ve got time to figure the rest of that out, right? I think so.”

“Yes. We do.”

They talk for a while more until Dean’s phone buzzes on the table where it rests. He picks it up apprehensively and his eyebrows raise when he sees the name on the caller ID. He sends Castiel a glance from the corner of his eye and he gets the message, excusing himself to the kitchen to get them something to drink.
“Hey, Dad.” Dean cringes at the greeting and how apathetic he sounds but, dammit, his Dad’s timing is screwy.

“Happy belated birthday, Dean.”

“Thanks. How’s the roads.”

“Shitty. That’s the reason I wasn’t able to call yesterday. I’m so sorry – there was an accident and tra-“

“An accident? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Dean. The truck skidded a few times too many so I parked at a rest stop for a few hours until the snow let up to get some sleep. But that’s not important. Bobby told me that you had a date on your birthday? That’s my boy!”

Dean groans. “If I say ‘yes’ will you try to not embarrass me?”

John chuckles into the phone. “There’s no guarantees on that one, champ.”

“Yes.”

“With?”

“Dad. Seriously? A friend from school – Cas. But don’t worry. Sam’s given him the okay.”

“Really? Well, introduce the kid to Ellen. When she can vouch for him, then I’ll feel better until I meet him myself to vet him out.”

“Oh, god,” Dean groans.

“Did Sam give you the present?”

“Yeah,” Dean swallows. “Yeah, he did. Thanks for that, Dad. It was perfect.”

“I thought you’d like it. Your mother – she would’ve been proud of you, Dean. You and Sam both. I am, too. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, Dad. I know.”

John clears his throat gruffly. Dean may have inherited his looks for Mary, but the one thing he got in spades from his Dad is their emotional constipation. And Dean’s more than okay with that if it spares him for awkward and embarrassing and somewhat traumatizing conversations with his father. “Good. I’ll be home soon, Dean.”

“That’s great. I’m starving and Sammy’s a shit cook.”

“That is true. Look, Dean, I gotta go. I need to call your brother to check in with him and then get back on the roads.”

“But not before you call Bobby for more gossip, apparently.”
“Yeah, well. You’ve got all my good tapes in the Impala. What the hell else am I supposed to listen to on the road?”

Dean laughs at that and says his good-byes. He rests back against the couch, ready to call out for Cas to come back before he doubles over with another cough, more intense than the others have been. They subside after a while, allowing Dean to draw a breath, but that only seems to trigger another fit.

“Dean?” Cas calls from the kitchen. “Are you alright?”

Dean grunts in lieu of a real response, afraid to set off another fit and leans back onto the couch to catch his breath. A hand crawls up to his sternum and he palms the place where he knows his scar is and swallows.

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Castiel has never set foot in the Winchester kitchen so he rummages around blindly in the cabinets looks for clean glasses. It’s not until he opens the third cabinet door that he finds the glasses sitting on the second shelf. What’s on the first shelf, though, is what really catches his eye. Staring back at him, Castiel blinks at the row of amber prescription bottles with ‘WINCHESTER, DEAN’ printed on the labels and drug names that he can’t pronounce and his mouth goes dry.

Chapter End Notes

PS: Your comments are awesome! I'm so glad you guys like this. Seriously. You're the best.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in updating! Life/school/work/The Real Housewives of Atlanta interrupted my ability to write a new chapter.

I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

His eye catches on the familiar name of pain medication and antibiotics before landing on ‘CYCLOSPORINE’ before he snatches a glass off the second shelf and pushes the door closed forcefully, yet quietly. He fills the glass with water at the sink before treading lightly into the living room. Dean’s eye cracks open when Castiel stops before him and takes the glass, downing half the water in only a few gulps.

“Thanks,” Dean croaks.

“You’re welcome.”

“Sorry about that,” he says after a while. “It was my Dad wishing me a happy birthday. We didn’t get a chance to talk this weekend.” Dean’s mouth opens like he wants to say more but it closes in a grimace. He pushes off against the couch and heads back towards the kitchen and Castiel trail only a few steps behind.

Dean goes to the cabinet that seems to store an entire pharmacy and he reaches for something before stopping – his arm freezing in place – before turning green eyes back on Castiel.

“You saw.” It isn’t a question, but Castiel nods anyway. Worry and curiosity war in his stomach before settling in like lead. He can’t look away so he watches as Dean nods to himself before reaching back into the cabinet and pulls out a white bottle that looks so different from the amber prescription ones. He flips the lid, drops one into the palm of his hand, and swallows it down before lifting the glass to his lips for another drink. Castiel tracks the movement of his Adam’s apple as his throat bobs and wants so badly to ask but Dean’s eyes flick back to him and the request dies before it even makes it past his throat.

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“You can ask. If you want.” Dean knows that his voices sounds hoarse and he’s not sure if it’s from the coughing or anxiety. Things have just started to get better for him and he doesn’t know how he’d deal if Cas turned and walked out or treated him like he’d break at every turn.

“All of those pills…Dean, are you sick?”

Dean closes the cabinet and jerks his chin towards the living room. Cas seems to get the message and they fall back into the couch cushions, facing one another.
“I-uh, I was sick for a while. It’s why I had to pull out of school. No one there really knows about it other than Chuck and my teachers. I mean, Sam knows, obviously, and so does Jo, but I asked them both not to say anything about it to anyone.”

“How ‘sick’ is sick that you still have all of those medications?”

“I have - had a heart-thing that got worse as I got older and it was touch-and-go for a while and I had to get surgery to fix it. If you want all the dirty details, I can –”

“No! I mean, I would be interested but…just tell me what you’re comfortable with?” Sometimes, Dean forgets that he hasn’t known Cas all that long compared to some of the other people in his life. If this was a conversation he was having to Sam or Jo, they’d push and push until he felt backed into a corner and would lash out. If he was talking to Gabe, he’d probably make some dumb joke to ease the tension. If he was talking to Charlie, god help him, she’d probably just start to cry and he doesn’t know which reaction would be worse. Cas, though, just seems to know to let Dean share what he wants to share and deal with the rest later. Perhaps it isn’t the most emotionally healthy tactic, but Dean can’t help but appreciate the gesture.

He rearranges himself on the couch and shifts closer to Cas so that their shoulders are touching even though he’s looking off at the blank television screen. The other boy gets the message loud and clear and places a reassuring hand on his thigh, anchoring him to the present when he could so easily get lost in the past. Dean clears his throat and continues, “It was really bad for a while and I – everyone thought that I wouldn’t make it.”

“But you are full of surprises.”

Dean can’t see Cas’s face, but he can hear the smile in his words. “Don’t you know it? The meds in the kitchen are mostly antibiotics and some other stuff. I have to take them every day at a certain time. That’s why my watch has the dumb alarm. Sam got it for me when I got out of the hospital so I’d remember to take my meds on time. Like I could forget, y’know? But it’s ‘solar powered so the battery won’t die, Dean’ or some crap. I think it’s dumb but it keeps him off my back, so I deal.”

“And your father still works so far away given everything?”

“Yeah, that’s mostly my fault. He used to work for my Uncle Bobby at his garage but when I got sicker, he had to take a better job that had better benefits to afford everything. I think Bobby still feels bad about that one but,” Dean shrugs, “the first one that came up was the first one he took. It’s working for one of his old Marine buddies driving big rigs. It was the only way for us to afford the surgery and all the meds after it. Remember at Charlie’s on my birthday you asked why we spent a lot of time traveling? I think I told you that Bobby managed to track us down but I never told you how.”

“Will you tell me now?”

“Yeah.” Dean nods. “My mom died when I was five and,” there has been thirteen years since that fateful day and the conversation he’s having with Cas, but saying the words out loud still feel like a physical blow that he can’t shake. He swallows it down though and continues, “I think my Dad tried to hang on as well as he could but…I think I was about seven when he packed up me and Sammy and took us on the road. It was only supposed to be for summer but we were gone almost two years. We went to school whenever Dad could find work to keep us in town for longer than a few weeks, but when we came back, Sam and I spent that entire first summer trying to get caught up with the other kids our age. I think that’s why Sam’s such a dork now,” he says jokingly. “For a while, I don’t really remember much other than being really tired and weak for a while. I think Sam and I were playing out in the motel parking lot when my dad was gone one day and I
collapsed. When I woke up, Uncle Bobby was there because I guess Sam gave the hospital his information and they called him before they even called our dad. That’s when they found out something was wrong with my heart but they told us that medication would stop it from getting worse. I was pretty out of it at the time but I’m positive I heard Bobby threaten to find some way to get custody of us over my dad if he didn’t agree to come back to Lawrence and…here we are.”

Cas is quiet for a while and Dean can’t seem to think enough to form words anymore. He just told Cas things he’s never told anyone before, not even the shrink Ellen talked him into seeing when he was younger.

“And now?”

Dean shrugs. “When my Dad was in town, I had a check-up in Wichita and everything came back okay so, I don’t know, I guess you just hope for the best.”

“I’m sorry you’ve had to endure so much, Dean. You’ve led a difficult life. It is selfish of me to say this but I’m glad you told me.”

“Really?” Disbelief colors Dean’s tone and he finally turns to face Cas and he’s surprised by the emotion that swims in his gorgeous blue eyes. He turns his head away again to stifle a cough into the crook of his elbow, lowly muttering an apology.

“Yes. It may sound ridiculous, but whenever Gabriel does something to annoy me or plays some stupid prank, I remember that were it not for him, I never would have met you. I am very grateful to have you in my life, Dean.”

“You uh, really know how to sweet talk a guy, Cas.” Dean clears his throat and he knows he’s doing a poor job of hiding the emotion that seeps through his voice but…dammit. Cas shouldn’t know Dean well enough to just know things like that to say to him. God, he’s turning into a freaking girl.

“I mean what I say, Dean. Is that why you’ve been meeting with Mr. Henrickson and Mr. Shurley so regularly?”

“Uh, yeah. They’ve been trying to make sure that I don’t fall behind on anything. And Henrickson’s been, uh, helping me fill out some college applications and stuff.” Dean mutters quietly. “I sent my first application in today. It was…a lot.”

“Where to, if you don’t mind – “

“Nah. I don’t mind. Just…don’t laugh at me, alright? I really wanna go to MIT, Cas. I know it’s far and a really good school but…I don’t think I’ve ever wanted something like this, y’know? I was so sure that I wasn’t going to even go to college or graduate and now Henrickson’s actually got me thinking that maybe I could go there and do something with my life when…” Dean cuts himself off abruptly and tenses in his seat.

“When what, Dean?”

Dean exhales a lungful of air and leans closer into Cas’s space hoping to draw in strength from the other boy. “When I was so sure I wasn’t even going to make it to graduation. It’s…overwhelming. And now I’m getting a freakin’ cold,” he adds, going for levity.

“Dean…”

“No, you don’t have to say anything, Cas.”
“But I want to say something. Will you allow me to do so?” Dean nods and Cas shifts in his seat so his back is resting against the arm rest and he’s looking Dean intently in the eye. “What I said earlier, about us not knowing each other longer, it wasn’t untrue but I find that still in that short time, you are an amazing person and you deserve as many good things as the universe gives you. You are more brilliant than you give yourself credit for and I have no doubt that you will get accepted to MIT and thrive there. Boston is an amazing city, Dean. I believe very strongly that we’ll have a great time there.”

Dean swallows and blinks. He can feel his throat working but his brain is misfiring. He wonders if all that coughing shook something lose when he can only muster a quiet, “‘we’?”

Cas’s smile is small and warm and Dean wants nothing more than to run his hands through that perpetually tousled head of hair and draw him in for a kiss. But, he’s a gross coughing mess and he’s not that familiar with the etiquette of dating, but he knows that giving his boyfriend his cold because he can’t keep his hands to himself is more than a little rude. Instead, he settles for threading their fingers together and returning Cas’s smile with a grin of his own. “Yes, ‘we’.” I wanted to tell you today but you had a meeting with Henrickson so I didn’t get the chance. I received a substantial scholarship to Brandeis and I have decided that I wish to attend. I think I might go for English or History. The East Coast seems like a nice change of pace from…”

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“I was going to say the Midwest, but,” he raises a shoulder in a shrug and smirks, “that works too, I suppose. My parents graduated from Northwestern and pushed for me to pick there, but my mind was made up the minute I got the acceptance letter from Brandies. All of the other schools I applied to pale in comparison. Did you know that one of the creators of *Friends* graduated from there?”

Dean barks a laugh and draws a chuckle from Cas as well. They sit in silence for a while and Deans his back against Cas’s chest and revels in the warmth he draws in. “We’ll have a kick-ass time in Boston, Cas. Does this mean that I have to start rooting for the Celtics?”

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Castiel laughs at that and draws Dean close. The weight of Dean’s revelation twists at his insides in a way he didn’t think was possible but he draws comfort from the fact that Dean is here and alive and okay. Despite that, he still cannot shake the worry that claws at the back of his mind pulling for his attention. When the negative thoughts refuse to fade away, he only pulls Dean in tighter and buries his face in the space between his neck and shoulder.

The doctors have said that Dean is okay. Dean says he is okay. Castiel tries to make himself believe that that will always be the case because as the days go on, he finds it harder and harder to imagine a world and his life without Dean Winchester in it.

Chapter End Notes

Somehow angst --> schmoop?
Don't worry. That won't be happening at ALL in the next chapter.

PS: I really appreciated all your kudos/comments even if I haven't had time to reply to them lately. But I still read them all.
It was early summertime and the motel he and Sammy were staying in while John worked had no air conditioner. Still, Dean found himself shivering under the thin material of his Batman t-shirt, sitting perched upright against the head board of one of the twin beds. Sammy was fidgeting restlessly from his place on the other bed only seeming to be half-watching cartoons on the motel’s black and white television set. The picture was grainy and the sound was muffled but it was better than listening to the steady hum of traffic from the highway the motel overlooked. But every time the bedsprings would squeak under Sammy’s shifting weight, Dean had to stifle a groan.

“Sit still, Sammy! Jeez. I can’t hear the TV over all your rustlin’.”

Sam huffed before flopping back onto the bed one final time. Dean’s head pounded and his limbs felt too heavy and any other day he’d feel bad about snapping at his brother but today was not any other day. John was gone when he and Sam woke up that morning with a note on the nightstand saying he’d be gone late working at the gas station in the next town and Dean wanted to punch something or cry. He was exhausted and sweat pooled under the collar of his shirt but the shivers wouldn’t stop.

Dean’s shaken out of his reprieve when the bed next to his shift’s again. He cuts his eyes over to see Sam peeking through the blinds of the motel room’s lone window and he turns back with a smile – shaggy hair falling into his face. “The sun’s out, Dean! And there’s only a coupla cars in the parking lot. Let’s go play or something!” Before Dean can respond with a resounding ‘no’ Sam takes off in a dash to the small table where a bucket of chalk sits. The night they’d checked in, Dean can remember stumbling sleepily along behind John with Sam at his side only slightly more aware. The manager cocked a fuzzy eyebrow over thick glasses at the sight and John’s gruffness. She cast sad looks at Dean and Sam and managed to push a small bucket of brightly-colored chalk into Sam’s hands and smiled at their whispered thanks.

After living in the backseat of the Impala for the past few months with nothing other than a few action figures, books, and their imagination to keep them sane, Dean appreciated the gesture, even if he would rather be sleeping right now instead. And, Dean is bored and tired of staring at the same tacky carpeting and mismatched wallpaper so he only puts up feigned resistance.

He takes lethargic steps over to where Sam stands by the door just before he yanks it open. Sunlight floods into the room. It gleams off the cars scattered in the parking lot and Dean groans, slamming his eyes closed against the light he almost regrets his decision but the heat from the sun does make him feel a bit warmer already so he only rolls his eyes a little bit when he feels Sam pushing at his back.

“Come on! Come on! Come on!” Sam chants and brushes past him into the parking lot.
It’s only been a few minutes but Dean already smiles at the way the warmth of the sunlight seeps into his bones. He tosses his head back to face the high-noon sun and rolls his neck against the tight muscles, feeling them give a bit. Sammy sits cross-legged in the shade of a tree just off the edge of the parking lot drawing some picture that Dean can’t really force himself to pay any real attention to right now. He’s warmer but his head is still pounding against his skull trying to break free. He lets out what he thinks must be a mix of a sigh and a and sways just so when he feels a breeze blow. He stumbles, only barely managing to recover himself at the sound of Sam’s voice.

“What time is Dad gonna be back?” Dean sways again. This time, though, the motion is much more intense than previously and his head snaps back up. He almost immediately regrets the sharp motion when his vision swims and darkens a bit around the edges. Sam’s eyes are locked on the piece of chalk in his hand, staining his fingers a bright green, and Dean takes a clumsy and dizzying step closer towards him. The movement is slow and sloppy – his legs almost too heavy to move.

“Are you okay, Dean?”

Dean almost misses Sam’s words thanks to the buzzing his ears. His breaths are coming faster and ragged now and his head’s swimming. Every attempt to open his mouth a produce words fails, so he grunts instead. That seems to get Sam’s attention and his big, brown eyes fly up to see Dean clutching a hand to his chest fighting to get air. Sam’s up in a flash taking rapid steps to close the distance between them and he clutches Dean around the shoulder.

Dean blinks. Sam’s words sound jumbled but Dean knows he’s talking because his lips are moving fast and frantic. Dean’s chest feels tight. He tries to take a deep inhale of air and is surprised by the wheeze he hears. He can feel his heart hammering against his chest and looks down to make sure it’s not trying to pound out through his skin like in all the cartoons he watches to pass the time. The parking lot seems to just shift before him and bile rises up but he swallows it back down.

“Dean! What’s wrong?!”

Dean swallows. “I-I don’t feel good, Sammy. M’chest hurts.”

“Why are your lips blue?” Dean doesn’t get a chance to answer. He’s just so tired lately and sore. His arms are tingling and he just can’t seem to take a breath. Sam lets out a shriek that sounds like ‘help’ but Dean can’t really focus on anything anymore other than the lack of oxygen in his lungs and the buzzing in his head. He must close his eyes for a second because when he becomes aware again, he’s on his back and Sam’s kneeling in front of him with tear tracks down his face shaking his shoulder and screaming to ‘wake up, Dean! Wake UP!’ Distantly he hears another voice that he doesn’t recognize – a woman, the motel manager maybe, talking and trying to calm Sam down and what he thinks might be sirens.

“Don’t feel good, Sam,” Dean mumbles. His cheeks feel wet and belatedly, he realizes that he’s crying too now. “When’s Dad gonna be back?”

“I don’t know, Dean. Bu-but you gotta stay awake! The lady said that help is gonna be here soon and then you’ll feel better.”

“Can’t breathe...”
Dean figures he must black out again because he wakes up in a hospital with a gruff and familiar face staring down at him under a ratty trucker hat in a dim room that he guess must be a hospital. He registers the beeping of monitors above his head and figures his guess must’ve been right.

“Uncle Bobby?” There’s an oxygen mask on his face and it’s muffling his voice, so he reaches a hand up to pull it off and Bobby slaps it away.

“Now you leave that on, boy. Y’hear me?”

“Yes, sir. Where’s Sam?” Bobby jerks his chin towards the chair on the other side of the bed in the small hospital room where Sam has folded himself into to sleep. “He’s been running the staff ragged, just wore himself out.”

“What happened?”

Bobby’s mouth twitches and Dean looks up to see his eyes are red and watery. “You’re a little sick, Dean-o. But don’t worry. The docs here are gonna fix you right on up. Got it?”

Dean nods. He can’t remember the last time someone called him by that nickname and his eyes sting. “How’d you know where we were to come?”

“Sam. He gave the hospital my number and I burned rubber getting out here. They didn’t even call John until after I got here. Only took me about two hours. Must be some kinda record, I’m bettin’. Why didn’t either of you ever call me? You know I would’ve come for you. You were only supposed to be gone a few weeks. It’s been a year and a half, Dean.”

“Dad said we weren’t supposed to. I tried and he got so mad, he wouldn’t talk to me for days. I’m sorry Uncle Bobby but he said – “

Bobby runs a hand down his face and exhales. “No, I’m sorry, son. It’s not your fault. You two are just kids. It ain’t your fault your Daddy’s got a screw lose. But don’t you worry about that now. Ellen’s on her way out here, too, soon as she finds someone to take care of Jo and Roadhouse. I’m guessin’ your Daddy’ll be on his way, too, and then we’re all gonna go back home and get you better.”

“Home?”

“Lawrence.” Dean can feel his chin wobbling under the oxygen mask and his eyes start to moisten. Bobby’s face contorts as he watches Dean try not to break down before asking, “you do want to come back, dontcha?”

“Yes!” Dean declares. “I wanna come home. Me and Sammy wanna come home but Dad said – “

“Hush now, boy.” Bobby snatches off his trucker hat and bends at the waist to pull Dean close. He goes willingly into his arms and his sobs are muffled by the mask. Bobby’s grip tightens around Dean’s thin shoulders before pulling away. He claps a rough hand on Dean’s damp cheek and smiles down, his own eyes brimming with tears. “We’re gonna take you home and get you better, y’hear me? We’re not going to let anything happen to you. We just got you back, and I can’t lose you all over again now. So just rest, alright? Me and your hard headed brother will be here when you wake up.”
“‘m really tired, Uncle Bobby.”

Bobby’s face twitches like he wants to say something and the words are on the edge of his tongue but he can’t – or won’t – let the see the light of day. “They’ve given you some medicine that’ll make you a little sleepy. Just don’t fight it, okay?”

Dean nods. He’s so exhausted and weary that he complies willingly. He doesn’t even think to ask what Bobby meant about ‘losing him’ until he’s pulled under by slumber.

Chapter End Notes

Comments/kudos/subscriptions/bookmarks are all greatly appreciated, guys! :) Thanks.

Regarding the way this chapter is written: This is coming from 8/9 year old Dean's perspective, not 18 year old Dean's memory of what happened. That's why his thoughts are so long-winded - like when a kid gets excited and goes on and on in long, drawn out sentences. He's also sick so he's not really 100% aware of what's all happening. There'll be a chapter in the future that'll fill in the holes left in Dean's POV.
Dean wakes up to the smell of bacon frying and fresh coffee. He blinks at the ceiling, against the gunk in his eyes, before craning his neck to check the time on his alarm clock. He moves to sit up when a familiar tightness takes hold of his lungs and he coughs into his fist. Smacking the taste away, he moves slowly to stand up and rummage around for a shirt before making his way downstairs.

“Sammy!” Dean calls out. “I know you aren’t trying to cook breakfast when we haven’t gotten the fire extinguisher refilled since the last time you tried to back Jess those cookies!” He stops cold, ignoring Sam’s blush and harsh stare, when he sees John standing at the stove, spatula in hand, stirring eggs in a skillet with Bobby, Ellen, Jo, and Sam all sitting or standing around the kitchen table staring up at him and it is a frighteningly familiar scene.

“It’s not my birthday again is it?”

Bobby snorts into his cup of coffee from where he leans against the sink and Dean moves to sit in the empty chair at the table. “No, ya idjit.”

“Oh. Okay, good.” Dean says. But then his brain suddenly clicks back on and he whirls around in his chair to face his father, who’s still scrambling a pan full of eggs. “Uh, Dad?”

“Dean?”

“What are you doing here?” From the corner of his eyes, he can see Sam stifle a chuckle as he bits into a piece of toast and groans internally. It’s gonna be one of those days, Dean can tell, where he’s walking around feeling like he’s managed to misplace his own DUNCE cap.

“Nice to see you too, son. Who knew that all it would take is for food for you to grace us with your presence?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m a lazy ass that likes to sleep in. Sue me. But you’re like four days early. How’d you swing that?”

“I’ve been driving longer than you three,” he says with a wave to Dean, Sam, and Jo, “have been alive. I know how to shave a bit of time off when I want to be home.” He shrugs, “it’s been a while since I’ve been here. Sue me,” he mimics.

“Oh, well. That’s good…” he says awkwardly. He barely registers Sam’s muttered “Smooth, Dean” before he turns his attention to Jo, Ellen, and Bobby. “So why are you guys here?”

“Maybe we just missed your pretty face, dumbass.” Jo chirps from her seat. She’s too busy laughing into her bowl of cereal to notice Ellen’s open palm flying towards the back of her head. “Ow!”
“You oughta watch that mouth of yours, Joanna Beth.”

“Sorry, Mom.” Dean only barely manages to resist the urge to flash her a smug smirk, knowing that Ellen has no problem turning her maternal punishments on him when the situation necessitates.

“Your brother called us. Well, Jo and me at least. The old man over there just decided to tag along.”

Sam sighs and stares down at his plate, bangs falling into his eyes. “Jess’s birthday is next week and I didn’t know what to get her. So I called Ellen for help. I’m not sure why Jo decided to come.”

Jo shrugs, “maybe I needed something from the mall, too.”

“You hate shopping.” Dean interjects.

“Or maybe I just wanted to watch Sam squirm.”

“Text pictures.” Dean whispers.

“Dean, stop making fun of your brother.”

“Yeah, Dean. You should totally stop making fun of me. Since Ellen and Jo and I will all be at the mall, you, Dad, and Bobby can all sit around and talk about Castiel. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Dean narrows his eyes at Sam in lieu of an initial reply until he realizes that he’s walked right into a trap. He looks nervously out of the corner of his eye to where Bobby still stands at the sink and where John is scooping spoonfuls of eggs onto plates, both carefully avoiding making any type of eye contact.

“Oh no…”

“Have fun, Dean.” Sam all but beams, the bastard, as he stands from the table. Ellen and Jo stand along with him but Ellen is decent enough to cast his a sympathetic smile before placing a peck on his temple.

Sometimes, Dean thinks that Ellen should be up for sainthood. He’s not that informed on how the process works but if he could tweet the Pope about it to make it happen, he totally would. She’s been in his and Sam’s life for as long as he can remember as a friendly face with hot burgers, an aunt, and the strongest female influence they’ve had in their lives since Mary. She’s put up with his dysfunctional mess of a family and was there for him and Sam when they got back to Lawrence all those years ago before he could wrap his too-young mind around just how sick he really was. He sees a lot of her in Jo and thinks that if Jo grows up to be half the woman Ellen is, the world will be a better and brighter place for it.

But then there are days like today; where she’ll lull Dean in with a false sense of security, like a harmless kiss at his hairline and a wink. But then she gets to the door in the living room and turns to face them all in the kitchen and calls out, “Go easy on Romeo over there, boys!” and Dean would curse the day they met if her burgers weren’t so damned good. And her cookies. And her pie. God, her pie alone is enough to make it all worth it and a slice of it right that second would make him completely ignore the way his face heats up all flush when she mentions that and the giddy little grin he gets when he thinks about Cas. Yeah, pie would help a lot of things right about now.
“So, tell us about this Castiel kid.” Bobby says once they’re alone. He and John fall heavily into the recently-vacated chairs and John places a plate of hot eggs in front of him.

“Really guys? We have to do this right now?”

“We could’ve done it hours ago if you’d get out of bed before noon on the weekends.”

Dean shrugs. There’s not much he can do about that one and he won’t even try to deny it. “We met at school.”

“We figured that much on our own, Dean.” Dean fidgets in his chair, where he sits in just his boxers and a t-shirt, under their gazes, absently scratching at his bare thigh.

Dean pushes back away from the table and stands. “Where are you going?” Bobby asks.

“To my room. For pants. I’m not gonna sit here and talk about Cas in my freakin’ underwear.” Before his barefeet even touch the first stair, he can hear John and Bobby snicker like schoolgirls.

“That’d probably be a good idea, kid.” Dean resists the urge to growl and stalks up the stairs hoping to find a clean pair of sweat pants and whatever shred of his dignity remains.

In his room, his phone blinks at him with a notification. It’s a text from Cas and Dean grins as he swipes a thumb over the screen to unlock it.

“Anna wants to meet you. Apparently Gabriel’s teasing hasn’t been enough and she would like to join in on the fun.” The text wasn’t sent that long ago so Dean hurries to tap out a reply.

“Small world. My dad’s back in town sooner than we thought he’d be. I’m getting the 3rd degree about you too.” Dean hits send and goes in search of pants. Since when did his life start playing out like some teen drama on TV? Although, he’s totally watch it if it was a show. It’d be a great lead in for Dr. Sexy. A spin-off maybe…Dean’s phone buzzes from the nightstand and he almost breaks his freaking neck getting to it as fast as possible.

“Small world, indeed. Perhaps we could all have dinner? Are you free tonight? I’d like to see you today.”

If his life was a teen drama, Dean reckons, the little flutter his stomach gives at the last sentence would totally make him the chick in the relationship. He grimaces at the thought but replies to Cas anyway, the flutter still ever-present.

“I’m free & i don’t think my dad has anything planned. Sam’s got ellen and jo rangled into some shopping trip and who knows how long that’ll be. But would it be ok if bobby came too?”

“Of course, Dean. He’s your family as much as your father, from what you’ve said. I’ve very much like to meet the two of them as well.”

“Great. Call me with the details?”

“Very well.”

Dean can’t help but roll his eyes at that. “You even text like we’re in some 20th century novel.”
“Is that a problem?”

“No. I find your dorkish ways to be kinda cute really.”

“I enjoy your ‘dorkier’ qualities as well, Dean.”

“Dorky? Dude. Have you seen my car? There aint a dorky thing about me man.”

“I’ve seen the pictures of you LARP-ing with Charlie, Dean.” Cas shoots back, as if it’s argument enough. And the little fucker is totally right. You can’t argue cool when there’s photographic evidence of you dressing up in chainlink armor with your other nerdy half floating out there somewhere. Especially if your nerdy BFF is out there showing those pictures to people. Fucking Charlie.

“Point.”

“ :)”

“I’ll talk to Anna and Gabriel and call you shortly.”

“Sounds like a plan. Later hotstuff.”

“-__-

That means that I am very unimpressed with that nickname, Dean.”

“Right. Sorry, baby.”

“Not better.”

“Talk to you soon. CAS”

“Perfect.”

Dean returns back downstairs fully dressed with brushed teeth and combed hair. He eyes his now empty plate, casting unimpressed glances at the men sitting around the table and flops back into his chair.

“We got hungry and you were taking too long.”

“There’s no ‘we’, Dean. Your Daddy all but inhaled that plate the minute your bedroom door closed.”

“Shut up, old man.” John turns to Dean, “what took you so long? You didn’t have to get all pretty just to talk to us, kiddo. We’re not the ones you’re dating.”

“Dad, seriously?”

“John, quit embarrassing the boy. Just cut to the chase, will ya?”

“Alright, alright. Just…I don’t know, tell me about Castiel.”

Dean shrugs, trying for nonchalant. “There’s not much to tell,” he lies. There’s so much to tell about Cas and he’s selfish and self-aware enough to know that there are parts that he’d like to keep to himself. Like how Cas can appear to be so serious and stern on the outside but how Dean
is able to pick apart and read his tells like he’s playing poker. Like how, despite the fact that they haven’t known each other all that long, Cas’s lightness has rubbed off on Dean, too, and can so easily make him forget the hard times when he can so easily be sucked back into it. Like, how with Cas even if he’s all the way at home with Anna and Gabe and Dean’s reading some essay for class or working on problem sets in his bedroom, he never feels alone anymore. He used to mock the dopey grins Sam would get whenever he talked about Jessica but Dean can’t bring himself to do that anymore when he can feel the same grin tugging on his lips whenever he thinks or talks about Cas.

“How’d you two meet?” John asks.

“We both have Henrickson for physics but he’s Gabe’s cousin. I met him my first day back.”

“Gabe?” Dean nods. “That scrawny kid with the weird eyes that egged all those houses a few Halloweens back?” Bobby asks.

“Yup. The one and the same. I guess he’s calmed down a bit since then. Almost getting arrested for pranking half the town will do that to a guy.”

“Is Castiel anything like his cousin?”

“No, Bobby. Relax. The garage is safe this Halloween. Cas isn’t anything like Gabe.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He’s smart and kinda quiet until you really get to know him and he’s kinda weird but in a good way, I guess? He’s…great. I like him a lot and I trust him and I would really appreciate it if you didn’t run him off when you meet today.”

John’s eyebrows shoot up at that. “We’re meeting him today?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s what took me so long while I was upstairs. Apparently, his other cousin wants to meet me and I figured if you want to know about him, you should meet him too instead of me telling you about him. We could all go for dinner or something today. I don’t know, it was his idea.”


Castiel decided to go to The Roadhouse for this strange dinner arrangement that Anna pressured him into making. If Dean was nervous, he’d at least have the comfort of a familiar setting and people he knew around him and Castiel could occupy his time with being with Dean and eating more burgers than anyone would recommend. It seemed like a reasonable suggestion when he brought it up to Anna and Gabriel, but Gabriel’s reaction set Castiel on edge. His eyes widened and he excused himself, cellphone clutched tightly in hand and Castiel wondered if he’d made a mistake.
Calling to inform Dean had been as easy as Castiel knew it would be. He could hear the grin in Dean’s voice while they spoke and he never failed to draw a laugh and a smile from Castiel as well. Living in Lawrence brought a lightness to Castiel that he didn’t know he could experience at boarding school. Severe teachers and equally severe students felt like a weight on Castiel’s shoulders making him more and more tense as time went on. However, in his new home of Lawrence, it almost felt like he could fly in comparison. It was a feeling he held on too with everything he had and wouldn’t ever release.

Castiel spent most of the day with his cousins. Anna had insisted that since he was attending college in Boston that she wanted to spend as much time together as a family as she could when she wasn’t working. So the three of them spent the afternoon ‘vegging out’ (as Anna put it) over a series of Gabriel’s God-awful romantic comedies that he’d only agreed to to get out of dish-duty for the rest of the month. He wasn’t above making sacrifices when the time called for them.

Sometimes, he thinks that Gabriel’s stomach runs on a timer. Not even thirty minutes before they’re meant to meet Dean’s family does his stomach start to growl from his usual spot sprawled out on the floor. He pets at it in some attempt to quiet the beast that is his gut but to no avail. Castiel’s phone chirps against his leg from where it’s tucked into his pocket and Dean’s name is lighting up across the screen.

“Hey, Cas.” Dean greets, before Castiel can say hello himself. “We’re about to head out to the Roadhouse now. I know it’s a little early but I figured the sooner we got in the car, the sooner I could turn up the radio to drown out all their yappin’.” Dean says this with no heat so Castiel smiles into the phone.

“That’s fine. We’re only watching some terrible movie that should’ve ended forty minutes ago, at least, so we can leave now, as well.”

“Great,” Dean says before he goes quiet. “So, what’re wearing?”

“Dean!” Castiel barks a quiet laugh, staunchly ignoring Anna’s curious glance from where she sits beside him.

“I’m only teasing. Just hurry up, huh?”

“Of course.”

When Castiel, Gabriel, and Anna arrived at The Roadhouse, Dean was already there sitting at the bar flanked by two older men.

“Dean-o!” Gabriel called out. Castiel could imagine Dean rolling his eyes or grimacing at the nickname but his face only broke out into a grin when his eyes landed on Castiel and Castiel couldn’t resist the urge to smile back.

Dean stood from his stool and strode over in long, confident strides. He brushed past Gabriel and his open arms and makes his way towards Castiel whose smile only widens. “Hello, Dean.”
Dean figures that he should care that his father and Bobby are coming up right behind him or that Cas is standing to the right of both of his cousins in a restaurant with a decent sized crowd, but he doesn’t. Cas’s cheeks are pink from the cold and his lips look chapped but Dean knows firsthand that looks can be deceiving and that Cas’s lips are warm and soft and pliant when they move with his when they’re together. But Dean swallows down that urge to press his lips to Cas’s and smiles faintly instead for a beat before turning to the redhead – Anna, his mind supplies – looking back and forth between the two of them with an amused expression.

“Anna?” He asks.

“And you must be Dean,” she responds, extending a hand. Her grip is firm and stronger than what he’d expect but he takes the challenge for what it is and his gaze never leaves hers. “It’s nice to meet you.” When she speaks this time, her voice is warm and her grasp on his hand loosens a touch to where she isn’t trying to break the bones.

“And I’m Gabriel, but you can call me Gabe. Everyone else does.” Gabe says. He steps over from where he stands behind Dean with an extended hand that Dean easily ignores.

“Wanna go sit down? We got a table and everything.” The door opens and rush of chill air brushes past them and Dean shivers without his jacket. Gabe’s face lights up and his eyes gleam with a degree of mischief that Dean knows by now to fear.

“Aw! Did we miss it?” A familiar female voice says from behind. Dean whips around so fast that he nearly knocks into Anna, offering an apologetic smile. There at the door stand Jo, Ellen, and Sam with eyes that dart back and forth from every familiar, and not so familiar, face in the entryway and Dean only barely manages to hide his groan.

“Seriously guys? Who told?” Dean asks, voice colored with frustration.

“Gabe. What, you think we’d miss this?” Sometimes, when Sam talks, Dean can only just blink up at him, because instead of the normal voice he knows the rest of the world hears, he only hears that voice from the Charlie Brown cartoons when adults speak. *Whomp, whomp, whomp.* This day is no different. His pain-in-the-ass brother is getting an obscene amount of pleasure from this and Dean thinks he might take him up on his offer to double date with Jessica for no other reason than payback.

“Let’s go sit, yeah?” Cas nods and interlocks their fingers together. They turn and head to the table, now occupied by John and Bobby and pointedly ignoring Gabe and Sam’s mirrored ‘aw’s!’

“So, Castiel,” John starts once their drinks have arrived, “you and Dean are in the same grade, right?” School is a safe topic, Dean reckons. At the table is now only Bobby, John, and Anna, along with Cas and Dean (everyone else being exiled by Ellen’s orders). Neither adult ignores the way they sit so closely to one another that their shoulders bump and their knees rest against each other’s under the table.

“Yes. We have our first period class together – physics.”

“So you’re a senior, then?” John seems to have decided to take the lead on this interrogation where Bobby seems to be more than okay with sitting back in his chair sipping a beer and observing. Anna takes a similar role, although her assessing stare has been placed on Dean.
Cas nods. “This is only my second year at Lawrence, though.”

“You like it here?”

“I like it well enough. I do enjoy the people I’ve met quite a bit,” he adds with a side-eyed glance to Dean.

“Do you know where you’ll be headed after you graduate?”

Cas straightens at this, drawing confidence on his future. “I was accepted to Brandeis in Boston. I’ll be going there in the fall.”

“Fancy,” John mutters.

“Not really. It’s a good school in a great city. I’m not completely decided on what I want to study, but I know that I want to do it there.”

“That’s great, Cas.” Bobby says, finally joining in the conversation. His eyes seemed to have softened from when the Miltons first arrived and Dean is grateful that at least one of them isn’t sticking to the drill sergeant act.

“And what about you, Dean? Have you heard back from any colleges yet?”

Dean swallows. He hasn’t. He knows that it’s early and that he’s only just sent his application in not more than two weeks ago, but he’s still anxious about it whenever the thought crosses his mind. Some of his anxiety might also have something to do with the fact that he never told anyone other than Cas and Henrickson of his plans and his goals. So he exhales and steady breath before shaking his head at her question and looking only at her. “No, I haven’t heard back from anywhere yet.”

Anna nods before speaking again. “Any idea on what you’d like to do? Castiel always talks about how you seem to always do better than him in your physics class.”

“That’s because I do.” At Dean’s chuckle, Cas shoots a glare that is somehow less intensified at the reddening of his cheeks. “I like that class a lot. I’m good at it and Henri – Mr. Henrickson – is a good teacher.”

“That’s great.”

There’s a welcome silence when the waiter comes with their order of burgers and while everyone eats other than the occasional shouted thanks to Ellen at the bar. Dean sinks his teeth into his burger like his life depends on it. With his mouth full of food, he can’t be expected to answer any more stupid questions and Cas seems to get that too because he’s inhaling his food. Well, either that or he really loves hamburgers. It’s actually probably a little of both.

Once the food is finished, Dean tosses a crumpled up napkin on his empty plate when he sees his Dad getting ramped up again for Round 2. “Cas and I are gonna go hangout for a bit. You,” he says, pointing at John, “and Anna can get the scoop about us from each other.” Cas is at his side in an instant as they stalk off towards the back of The Roadhouse while three sets of eyes from their table watch on.

The storage room is empty, save from crates of beer and peanuts. Dean sighs into the small room
and Cas turns away to shut the door behind them. “Thank fuck that’s over.”

“For now.”

“Yeah – it was like a bad episode from Law and Order or something.” Cas makes a noncommittal grunt, still facing away, before he rounds on Dean and presses him against the wall. He tastes of the Coke he’d saved until the end of his meal and Dean can’t even begin to figure why that’s the thing he pays attention to with Cas pressed up against him all rough and intense. His lips seem to be drawn to that newly-discovered ticklish spot just behind Dean’s ear and he groans when he feels his teeth scrape at it. “Oh, Jesus, Cas.”

When Cas pulls away, Dean stomps down his disappointment to take again the beautiful face before him in earnest. “I’ve wanted to do that since I walked into this place, but it seemed inappropriate with our families watching.”

“Well, maybe I should arrange for family get-togethers more often if that’s what I get.”

Cas’s face draws serious in a mock glare. “Don’t joke like that, Dean. You know the only reason Gabriel is here is because he’s an assbutt. That’s also why Sam and Jo are here. They take pleasure in our humiliation.”

“Yeah? Well, now I’ve got you all to myself back here why they all sit around and have awkward conversations with one another. It looks like we’re coming out ahead here, Cas.”

When Cas leans in again, Dean draws back a step. Cas’s eyes open in question and Dean sighs. “My friggin cough still hasn’t gone away and I’ve had a sore throat all morning after breakfast. I don’t want you to catch my cold.” If Dean were a completely forthright person, he would’ve said that his throat still hurts now, there’s a headache forming behind his eyes, and he’s been choking down cough medicine all day to stop his incessant barking. But Dean knows that it’s nothing and he also knows better than to worry Cas over something like that cough or a stupid headache.

“I don’t care about a cold, Dean.”

“Well, you should. I’m gonna be all gross and sick and sneezy in a day or two. We both can’t be disgusting, Cas.”

Cas’s first response is to lean in and place a chaste kiss to Dean’s lips before huffing a sigh. “Fine. Then I guess I won’t be kissing your face today.” Before Dean can respond, Cas’s lips are again nipping at that spot that makes Dean melt and his legs go wobbly. Cas’s arms move to Dean’s waist to pull him closer, and Dean returns the gesture, leaning in to the touch.

Chapter End Notes

So, this chapter was a lot of dialogue. Loads of dialogue. So. Much. Dialogue. And it was all because everyone in the Winchester-Singer-Harvelle-Milton Clan is here. That’s a lot of people. And it somehow ended up with more schmooop with Dean and Cas. But, any and all schmooop is done to make the upcoming angst all the more real. The next chapter should be up soon (hopefully).

Hope you liked it.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dean wakes slowly. He blinks against the faint sunlight trailing in around the edges of the curtains over his windows and smacks his lips against the stale taste in his mouth from falling asleep with his mouth wide open. His breath sounds funny and when he coughs, he grimaces against the feeling of phlegm moving in the back of his throat. When he finishes, his lungs are tight and he inhales steady and deep breaths to calm himself. Through all of that, he nearly misses the alarm clock on his night stand with its angry red numbering that shows he’s over two hours late for school. Beside the alarm clock is his phone that blinks with unread text messages from Gabe and Cas, asking where he is and he types out a quick reply that he overslept.

He stands quickly from the bed and regrets the action almost immediately when he stomach rolls with nausea and his head begins to throb in earnest. When the moment passes, he grabs whatever passable clothing he has scattered around his room and dresses hurriedly before heading to the bathroom. Sam’s been at school since early this morning at some club meeting and John’s out salvaging car parts with Bobby for a clunker the three of them are planning on rebuilding as a birthday present for Sam (so Dean’ll never have to worry about his behind the wheel of the Impala unless they’re all in dire straits) so the house is quiet and empty when Dean makes it downstairs. On his way out of the backdoor, he bypasses a plate of what looks like breakfast that was left for him when his stomach gurgles in protest at the idea of food. He barely notices the fact that he hasn’t felt much like eating yesterday or the day before, either.

When Dean arrives at the school, his headache has begun to subside and he takes it as a good sign. He sticks his head in the doorway of the main office and puts on his most charming smile to wave at the secretary. “Yes,” she says, “I am aware that you are late, Mr. Winchester. I heard that monstrosity you call a car the second you pulled into the lot and already updated the attendance records.” Dean blinks at her but remains silent. She huffs a sigh and finally tears her eyes away from the computer monitor to look at him. “Shouldn’t you be on your way to class?” Dean obeys, turning on his heel and leaving the office at her command.

On his way to his locker to hang up his things, he walks past Henrickson’s classroom. There are no students there and Henrickson’s standing to run the eraser over the chalkboard and his eyes cut to Dean when he knocks on the door to announce his presence. Dean swallows, scrunching his face up in discomfort at the pain in his throat and takes a step forward.

“You’re a little for class, Dean. Or early, I suppose. Depends on how you look at it.” Henrickson says lightly. When Henrickson lowers the eraser and turns to face Dean, his expression morphs into something Dean’s never seen on his face before in all the time he’s known the man. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Dean croaks.

“Sit down,” At Dean’s hesitation, he walks over and grips Dean’s arm to drag him to the nearest desk. “You look like shit, Dean. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Teachers aren’t supposed to cuss at their students.”

“I’m not joking with you right now, boy. Why aren’t you at home?”
Dean runs a hand down his face and pinches the bridge of his nose. “It’s just a cold. And I overslept this morning – that’s why I missed class.”

“I don’t care about you not showing up for class for a day, Dean. And how do you know it’s ‘just a cold’? You a doctor now?”

When Dean goes to insist that he doesn’t need to go to a doctor, he launches into another coughing fit that leaves his breathing uneven when he finishes. Henrickson raises an unimpressed brow and stares hard. “Want to try denying that now? Go ahead. I’ll wait until you catch your breath.”

“It is. I’ve…felt it coming for a while now.”

“And?”

“And I was taking meds for it on top of my regular meds and thought it was going away. It wasn’t this bad yesterday.”

“So you’re admitting that this,” he says, waving a hand in Dean’s direction, “is bad?”

Dean shrugs. He can’t deny it now. “I guess. I woke up this morning feeling like shit.”

“And yet here you are.” Henrickson sighs, “I’m impressed with your dedication here, kid, I am. But your health comes first. After everything that went down last year, you should know that by now, Dean.”

“I do! But my dad…he never wanted me to be back in school fulltime anyway. I gotta graduate with my class. If I do like he wants, I might as well just go and get my GED. He doesn’t get that.”

“I know that sucks, but I think I’m going to have to call your father, Dean.”

“No!” Dena feels a cough trying to bubble up to the surface and tries to keep it buried even if it’s making his voice strained. “Please, man. I’m begging you. I’ll – I’ll go home and rest and whatever but you can’t call my dad.”

“You can’t really expect me to let you drive yourself home like this Dean. It looks like you can barely keep your eyes open. Have you been sleeping at all?”

Dean’s shoulders rise and fall in another pitiful shrug. The truth is sitting nicely on the tip of his tongue but he swallows that down like it’s another cough. “Not well. I mean, I’ve been pretty anxious lately about all the MIT stuff. My dad found out that I applied to some schools and he hasn’t mentioned it to me since. I’m kinda waiting on the other shoe to drop.” Dean doesn’t mention what his real fear is – that John knows it’s nothing but a pipe dream and he’s willing to let the admissions committee at whatever college he thinks Dean applied to be the realistic ones instead of doing it himself.

“Are you sure that’s all it is?”

“No.”

“Look, I won’t call your father right now but you need to go home – and not alone. Tell me what class Sam is in and I’ll grab him and come up with some excuse for him to miss the rest of the day without his other teachers getting on his case. He’ll take you home.”

Dean leans forward and lets his head fall to the desk with a satisfying thump and rubs at his sternum. All that coughing making his chest sore. “What time is it?”
“Quarter ‘til noon.”

“Uh…study hall. I think.”

“Alright. I’ll be back, don’t go anywhere, Dean. I mean it.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Dean lets his head drop down to the desk with a resounding thump and closes his eyes. He supposes that he falls asleep because the next thing he’s aware of is someone’s hand on his shoulder shaking him awake. He slowly moves to sit up at the desk and blinks blearily at Sam’s face – brows drawn down low in concern and Henrickson standing just beyond his shoulder.

“Dean,” Sam breathes in exasperation, “what the hell, dude?”

Dean’s only response is to drag his hand down his face and Sam rolls his eyes before huffing another sigh. “Thanks for coming to get me, Mr. Henrickson.”

“Not a problem, Sam. Just get that thick-headed brother of yours home, alright?”

Dean hates being talked about like he’s not sitting in the room with them. Before he gets a chance to voice his frustration, Sam’s there pulling him to his feet and holding his hand out expectantly for the car keys. “I don’t need a friggin’, chauffeur.” Sam’s eyes don’t waver and he juts his jaw out stubbornly until Dean sticks his hand down his front pocket and presses them into Sam’s hand, eyes hard in a silent warning for Baby.

“Take care of yourself, Dean.” Henrickson calls out as they cross the threshold of his classroom door into the hallway.

On their way to the car, Sam keeps a firm grip on Dean’s upper arm, like a gust of wind could knock him off his feet. Dean’s pretty sure that on the drive home, Sam’s prattling on and on about how dumb and stubborn Dean can be sometimes, but Dean’s not listening. Instead, he rests his forehead against the cold window of the passenger seat and lets his eyes drift closed.

Dean shuffles his way into his bedroom with Sam not far behind carrying a glass of water and some of Dean’s medications. He waits for Dean to shrug out of his coat and step out of his boots and jeans before handing them over. “Take this.” Dean does and falls back onto his bed in a huff. “That was really stupid what you did today, you know.” When Dean gives a grunt rather than an actual response, Sam sits beside him on the bed. “Henrickson was really worried. God, when he came to get me, I assumed you’d gotten in trouble for goofing off in class or something because I knew you wouldn’t be careless enough to come to school if you were feeling like shit.”

“Sam…” Dean grumbled. His head ached and his patience was shot for Sam’s lecturing. He just wanted to sleep.

“No, Dean! God, do you realize how stupid that was? You could’ve crashed your precious car on the way to school this morning and gotten yourself killed. You’re wiped, man.”

“Maybe you should take that as a hint to leave me alone.”

“You’re such an asshole sometimes.”

Dean shrugged before coughing into the crook of his elbow. When he looked back up, concern was etched over Sam’s face and Dean flopped back on to his mattress. “Stop it with the puppy
“Dog eyes, man. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. Maybe I should call Dad.”

“Do that and you’ll regret it, Sammy. I mean it.” Sam seemed to ignore Dean’s hollow threat and perched himself up further on Dean’s bed, resting against the headboard. “You should get out of here, Sam, before you catch what I’ve got.”

“Dude, we live together. If I haven’t caught it by now, it’s probably fine.” Dean groaned as he sat up. He scooched to the top of the bed and leaned against the headboard next to Sam. “You know, you did pick a pretty good time to catch the cold from hell.”

“Yeah?” Dean asked sarcastically. “And why is that?”

“I had a chem test this afternoon that I wasn’t ready for at all.”

“You, Samantha, unprepared for a test? My god!”

“Shut up, jerk.”

“Maybe if you sucked a little less face with Jess – “

“Dean!” Sam interrupted, scandalized.

“- and spent a little more time with that chemistry book, you wouldn’t need me to be your Get Out of Your Exam Free Card.”

“You’re such a jerk, Dean.” Sam laughed.

They were quiet for a while and Dean felt his head begin to lull to the side as exhaustion washed over him when he heard Sam shift on the bed beside him. “You really scared me, Dean. Don’t...just be careful? Please?”

“Yeah, Sam. Promise.”

“Do you need me to stay home with you tomorrow?”

“God, no. All I wanna do is sleep and watch Wendy Williams.” Dean’s eyes fall closed and he thinks he hears Sam’s quiet laugh beside him as he falls back asleep.

When Dean wakes up hours later, it’s dark outside his bedroom window, he’s alone and he feels like his skin is on fire. He kicks the sheets of his legs and belatedly realizes that he’s only wearing boxers and a t-shirt but still sweating profusely. Even the brief movement of untangling himself from his blankets makes his head throb and he clenches his eyes shut against the pain.

It feels like needles are digging into every inch of his skin and everything aches in a steady but intense pulsation. Sam, he thinks. Dean knows he’s in trouble when a familiar tightness settles in his chest and his breath comes out harsh and haggard. He moves gingerly to lever himself up on the edge of the bed and stands on wobbly legs. He barely makes three steps away from the bed before the room spins around him and he collapses onto the floor in a crumpled heap.
Sam is poring over chemistry notes in the living room and instantly knows that something’s wrong the minute he hears a dull thud upstairs. He stands quickly, books falling to the floor at his feet, and he takes hurried strides to the stairs and up to Dean’s room.

“Dean?” He calls from the top of the stairs. When the call goes unanswered, he pushes open the door to Dean’s bedroom and flicks on the light to be greeted by his brother’s prone form sprawled out on the floor before him.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not crazy about this chapter, honestly, but the next one’ll be better.

Thanks for all the comments/subscriptions/kudos/bookmarks/views/(am I missing something? I don't think so)!! I never EVER expected this to be seen by so many eyeballs.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Super short chapter to transition into more sick!Dean. Mostly Sam POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dean thinks that he hears a panicked voice above him but all he can think about is the fire and how hot it burns. His heart thuds away in his chest against his breastbone and he groans and twists on the floor in an attempt to get away but no matter how he moves, the heat seems determined to follow behind him. The voice above him talks hurriedly to someone before rustling closer and laying a hand on his forehead. The touch is grounding and Dean can finally make out what the voice is saying, “he’s burning up! Please, hurry.”

He knows he’s burning, can feel his blood boiling with it.

They’re going to lose this house like they lost the last one to fire and he’s going to be trapped inside like Mary. Dean watched his mother be swallowed up by flames and now it’s his turn.

He makes an attempt to open his eyes and his lids flutter in the light from the ceiling. His eyes scan the room tiredly in search of the waiting flames, only he sees nothing but a face with brown hair obscuring his immediate vision.

“S’mmy?” He mumbles.

“Dean? Dean, hey. Keep your eyes open for me man, okay? It’s really important.”

“‘s so hot.” Dean swallows. His throat is dry and his tongue feels too big for his mouth but he needs to get away before the fire takes them both like it took Mary and a little piece of them all. “The fire, S’mmy. It burns. Don’ wanna burn like Mom. Please.” Dean thinks that he might let out a series of pained whimpers at the pressure in his chest. His voice sounds breathless of his own ears and, while his vision isn’t clear, he can see Sam inch closer and feel has his head is onto his lap while Sam brushes the lose strands of his hair away.

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“There’s no fire, Dean. I promise. You’re gonna be okay.” Sam repeats these string of words like a prayer, willing himself to believe them as truth and not just something to calm his brother so that he can breathe easier. He watches as Dean’s eyes flutter closed and just when he goes to make another attempt at rousing him, there’s pounding at the living room door. He lets Dean’s head fall back to the carpeted floor of his bedroom gently before running on shaky legs to answer the door and let the paramedics in. He rambles to them about what’s happened, Dean’s medical history, how he collapsed and seems to be hallucinating – all of it. He goes to inhale a shaky and anxious breath and tastes salt. It’s not until then that he realizes he’s been crying this entire time.
The lights of Lawrence General Hospital are too bright and artificial and only seem to make his headache worse. Dean was rushed back behind the wide doors of the emergency room almost 30 minutes ago and it’s only now that Sam feels calm enough to be able to make the necessary phone call to his father and everything. The last time this happened, the first person Sam had thought to call was Uncle Bobby and he’s thankful that the two men are together right now out picking through junker car parts for whatever reason because he’s not sure he wouldn’t make the same decision again despite how things may have changed.

The line rings three times before someone answers. “Yeah, Sam?”

Sam exhales a shaky breath, his composure already starting to shatter. He’s gripping his phone so hard that it shakes in his hand. “Dad. It’s Dean.”

There’s a rustle of things in the background and he hears John shout out for Bobby to ‘get his ass in gear’ before he speaks into the phone again. “What happened, Sam? Are you boys alright?”

“I’m fine but Dean’s in the hospital. He passed out a little while ago and we’re at Lawrence General. No one’s come to tell me anything and Dean’s been gone over a half hour now! That must mean he’s hanging on, right? Since no one’s come to say anything bad? Shit, Dad. Where are you guys?”

“We’re about an hour out but we’re getting out shit together now. I’m driving so we’ll be there in less than an hour. Do you think you can hold it together until then?”

Sam nods before he realizes that his father can’t see or hear the shake of his heads and grunts in affirmative.

“Listen to me, Sam. Bobby’s on the phone with Ellen. Her and Jo’ll be there any minute, alright? I don’t want you sitting up there by yourself.” (The ‘like last time’ goes unsaid and Sam is grateful because this time is bad enough on its own without comparing it to the last time where they found out that Dean’s heart wasn’t in it for the long-haul.)

“Sure, sure. Dad, just hurry okay?”

“We’re coming Sam. Just hold it together until we get there, got it?” In any other instance, Sam would’ve readily shrugged the order, balked at it even, but he knows this is more for Dean than to fulfill John’s militaristic fantasies so he agrees. He’s got to hold it together for Dean. At least, until help arrives. He can manage that much.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter probably won’t feature too much of Dean's POV but his health history will be revealed to Cas by Sam, John will be dealing with his guilt and angst!
Activity in the emergency room thrummed around Sam while he stared listlessly down at his hands balled into fists resting on his thighs. At some point since he and John last spoke, Ellen and Jo had arrived as promised. They spoke to the triage nurse about Dean since words seemed to fail Sam whenever he attempted to open his mouth. Instead, he kept up a mantra that charged full force in his head.

Dean is okay.

Dean will be fine.

Dean’s heart is fine.

He remembered talking to Dean after his last doctor’s appointment where his progressed was checked and he said he was fine. John said he was fine. Dean promised he was fine. And Sam had assured him that he’d stay that way, that waiting for the other shoe to drop was a waste of the second chance at life he was given. And yet, he still sat stiffly in the ER lobby in a hard-backed plastic chair like he did what seemed like a lifetime ago only yesterday. Now they were back at square one – waiting on some doctor to come through the double doors and potentially shatter their worlds. Fuck, Sam couldn’t handle this, not again. He couldn’t lose Dean – not like this. Not ever.

At some point, strong hands were gripping him by the forearms and pulling him from his chair before he was crushed against a strong chest. Sam buried his head in his father’s shoulder, wrapping shaking arms around the man.

“He’ll be alright, Sammy. You’ll see,” John murmured. Sam nodded, but still held on until John was the first to pull away. “Sam, I need you to tell me what happened, okay?”

Sam nodded and blinked back tears. “He, uh – he was sick this morning and he got to school late. Mr. Henrickson was worried so he came and got me and I brought him back home and he went to bed. I was doing my homework in the living room later that night and I heard this thud. When I got upstairs, Dean was passed out on the floor.”

“Was he conscious?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, but he wasn’t making any sense, you know? He had a fever and…I think he thought he was back in the fire. With Mom. He kept saying that he didn’t want to burn, too.” Sam ignored his father’s sharp inhalation of breath at that and continued. “Dad, that’s bad, right? He was hallucinating. It was like that day in the parking lot of that shitty motel all over again,” Sam spat. “I should’ve brought him to the hospital after we left school, Dad. This is all my fault. What if something’s wrong with his heart again? He can’t get another transplant – he almost didn’t get
the first one!” Sam’s chest was heaving by the time he finished. Beside him, Ellen, who appeared to be doing her damnedest to try and hold back her tears, held a weeping Jo in her arms, Bobby looked stricken next to John with his trucker cap crushed in trembling hands and John looked wrecked. All trace of color left his face and all that remained was a sickly looking gray. His jaw worked – clenching and unclenching – and he nodded before speaking.

“This is not your fault, you hear me, Samuel? I won’t have you talking like that about yourself. You got me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now take a seat before you tip over.” Sam obliged before turning to Jo and Ellen. “I hate to ask you this, but I need a favor.”

“Anything John. You know that.”

“Would you mind heading over to the house and collecting Dean’s medications and a few things for Sam – change of clothes, maybe?”

Ellen nodded, “yeah, we can do that for ya, John.”

“Thanks.”

The rattling of Dean’s pill bottles in his bookbag announce the return of Ellen and Jo. Their expressions mirror one another and are as pinched as they were when they left. Ellen hands off the bag to John, who’s talking to another nurse, and Jo sits perched on the chair next to Sam.

“Sam?” Sam looks up to Jo’s red eyes and blinks. “Dean’s phone was sitting on his nightstand. I grabbed it on our way out. Do you think we should call Cas? Let him know what’s happening?”

Sam’s eyes flick down to Jo’s hand where the phone is clutched. *Cas. Dean would want him to know. He’d want him there.* Sam nods and gives Jo a tentative smile as he reaches out to take the phone. “I’ll go call him now. Thanks, Jo.”

“Sure.”

When Castiel’s phone rings that night, he’s already in bed and half asleep. He’s tempted to ignore the call because if it’s important, they can leave a message that he’ll check tomorrow but curiosity gets the better of him and he rolls over and snatches it off his desk Dean’s name glows up at him and he answers with a sleepy smile. “Hello, Dean.”

“Oh, hey Cas. It’s Sam.” Sam’s voice is tight and hushed and immediately Castiel sits upright in bed.

“Sam? Is everything alright?”
Sam gives a chuckle that sounds suspiciously wet before he speaks again, “Dean’s in the hospital.” If Castiel strains his ears and listens carefully, he can hear Sam’s breath coming over the line hard and fast and panicked.

A familiar feeling of dread finds a home in Castiel’s stomach and his eyes close tightly. “What? What’s happened?”

“We don’t know anything yet. I’ve been here for a few hours. Jo and her mom are here and my Dad and Uncle Bobby. I just thought that you should know – that you’d want to be here because Dean’d want you here.”

Castiel is up in an instant, digging for clothes and shoes. “Do you have any idea what’s happened? Anything?”

“Just that he collapsed. If, uh, if you get here we might have some information then? I know Dean’s told you some stuff, but knowing him, he probably left out a few details.”

Castiel nods before he realizes that Sam cannot see him. “Yes, he told me some things but…I didn’t want to push the issue. It seemed to upset him.”

“Yeah, the stubborn idiot. So are you coming?”

“Oh course, Sam. I’ll – I’ll wake Gabriel and get a ride from him. He’d want to know what’s happening, too. We’ll be there soon. Just – will he be alright?” Dean will be alright – he said so.

“I don’t know, Cas.”


Dean feels like he’s floating, but he knows that that isn’t right. Voices are muffled around him but when he tries to will his eye lids to open, they don’t so much as twitch. He tells his fingers to move, but he knows that nothing is happening. The feeling is all too familiar and a sense of dread slams into him like a tidal wave.

Dean is just aware enough to hear the shrill beeping of machines around him and feel the tightness in his chest when his lungs feel like they won’t expand anymore. Someone calls his name but it sounds as if they’re talking to him while he’s under water. He strains his ears to listen but there’s a pinch in the crook of his arm and a warmth that seeps into his body and he falls back into unconsciousness.


When Dean would mock Gabriel for the state of his car, Castiel would roll his eyes and generally ignoring their bickering because he had zero interest in cars (not that he would tell that to Dean, however). But when Castiel pulls Gabriel away from his Skype session with Kali in the middle of
the night and explains what is going on, he has never been more grateful for Gabriel’s eye-sore of a car when they peel out of the driveway. Anna was still sleeping, so Castiel typed out a hasty text message to her letting her know where they would be before sinking back into the passenger seat and toying with a stray piece of thread on his jeans.

He can feel Gabriel eyeing him from time to time and lets out a huff of breath before speaking. “I know that I have not been very forthcoming with information about this, but I appreciate what you are doing for me, Gabriel.”

Gabriel snorts. “Winchester’s my friend, too, Cassy.”

“I know. And I also know you’re probably wondering what this is all about.”

“You mean why Dean would just keel over all of a sudden and then the first and only time anyone mentions his ‘heart-thing’ to me is when you need a ride to the hospital?”

“It, it’s not like that.”

“It’s not?”

“No.”

“Then why don’t you tell me what the hell is going on because I’ve got no idea what’s happening here.”

“I – I don’t have much in the way of details myself. I didn’t want to push Dean into telling me something when he wasn’t ready to on his own. All I know is that his ‘heart-thing’ is the reason he’s missed so much school previously and that he still takes medication for it. Sam has promised to give more information when we arrive at the hospital.”

“Jesus.” Gabriel runs a hand down his face and Castiel is struck once again by how lucky he is to have Gabriel, and Anna, in his life. Even if some series of strange and random circumstances led him and Dean to one another, he doesn’t think he’d be able to handle what all is happening without Gabriel sitting in the seat next to him. “Did Sam say anything useful over the phone? Anything at all?”

Castiel shakes his head and continues to finger the thread and newly-forming hole in his jean. “No, I’m fairly certain he didn’t know much about what was happening, either.”

“Fuck.”

“Agreed.”

They’re quiet until they arrive at the hospital. Gabriel double-parks in his haste and Castiel can’t find it in himself to tell him. Instead, he all but runs through the doors to find the Winchester-Harvelle clan huddled together in a corner. Sam is sitting in a chair, weariness making itself known through the dejected slump of his shoulders and tight draw to his mouth. Ellen, he assumes, and Bobby as sitting close to one another, knees pressed together while Ellen keeps an arm around Jo. Castiel’s eyes flick last to John who stands leaning against a wall adjacent to Sam. Under the harsh lighting of the ER, he looks as though he’s aged ten years since the day Castiel has met him with a tense set to his shoulders and jaw. His eyes draw themselves up from the tiled floor and land on Castiel. He raises an eyebrow in question before nodding him and Gabriel over.

“Sam called you boys?”

Castiel nods. “Yes, sir.” At the mention of his name, Sam’s head comes up and he gives Castiel
and Gabriel a tired smile. “We got here as fast as we could.”

A blonde nurse emerges from a set of double doors and walks to the front desk. John catches the movement as well and straightens up from his spot on the wall. “I’m gonna go see if I can get us some answers. We’ve been sitting here with our thumbs up our asses all damn night.” Sam nods at John’s low growl of a pronouncement as he stalks off before he turns to Castiel.

“I’m glad you guys could be here.”

“Where the hell else would we be, Sammy?” Gabriel collapses in the seat next to Sam but Castiel does not move from under Sam’s unwavering gaze. He was promised answers and he plans on collecting. He needs to know what’s happening and he wants to know now.

“Sam. You said you’d…tell me what was going on.”

“Right. Yeah,” Sam nods and up close Castiel can see just how worn out Sam looks. His eyes are red and puffy and his face is pale and tight. He knows this is bad. It has to be. “I don’t know how much Dean has told you but I guess I should start from the beginning of everything. So, um, just let me know if you’ve heard any of this before and I can fast forward a little.

“When we were kids, Ellen threw Jo birthday parties every year in the summer. When she turned six, Ellen got one of those inflatable swimming pools and invited us all over for a cookout and stuff. Dean was sick, though, strep throat so he couldn’t go. Our mom stayed home with him and Dad took me to the party so I wouldn’t be stuck in the house and catch what Dean had.” Sam looks away and takes a shuttering breath before continuing. “She died that night, our mom. Our house caught on fire, something with the wiring, and Dean got out by some miracle but he won’t ever talk about it so we never knew how. Our mom, though, the smoke killed her. Sometimes, I think Dean saw and remember a lot more than he lets on about it but…he wouldn’t talk to anyone for weeks after that and when he did start up, Dad didn’t want him shutting down again I guess and never asked after it much. And I was just a stupid kid. God, everything went to hell and back when she died. It was like our family completely fell apart without her holding us together,” Sam shakes his head and Castiel can see very clearly the tears that are threatening to spill at the mention of their mother. “Uhm, anyway, when the house burned down, just about everything we owned did too except for some boxes that were tucked away in the basement. We lost Dean’s antibiotics and everything was such a fucking mess after Mom died that no one really thought about it. Dad was holding on by a thread at that point and Ellen and Bobby took us in and kept us fed. Dad, he got more and more distant and twitchy, like staying in Lawrence was an itch under his skin he couldn’t get to. Eventually, he packed us up in the Impala and took off without saying a word to anybody. No one knew where we were for months. Before that, he was hardly ever in town and we spent more time with Ellen, Bobby, and Jo, than with him but he said he was going to ‘do right’ by us. I guess that meant sneaking off with us like a thief in the night.” Sam huffs and it’s a bitter sound. Castiel can’t help but wonder how he and Dean could begin to forgive John after that but he’s not one to talk about healthy parent-child relationships. His conversations with his parents are mostly over email and are only ever about school and if he’s behaving for Anna. He shakes the thought from his head and focuses on the rest of Sam’s story.

“One night, about two years later, Dean and I were staying in this rundown motel just off the interstate while Dad was off working some bullshit job to keep gas in the tank and Dean just collapsed like a ton of fucking bricks in the middle of the parking lot. I had the hospital track down Bobby and he came for us but it was a shit show after that. He practically had to threaten my dad to get him to willingly bring us back home. And he only did it because Dean was already pretty sick at that point.

“Lots of people get strep and if you take the meds for it, it’s usually fine but it just festered in Dean without anyone paying attention. He got sick a lot for a while after that, we just thought it was
colds or the flu or something, I don’t know. But Dean’s went untreated for so long that that it caused rheumatic fever and that went untreated for so long that it fucked up his heart. The doctors at the hospital told us that they didn’t know how Dean managed to stay upright and conscious for so long it was that bad.

“He needed a transplant but getting a new heart? It's so rare that they all but told us to say our goodbyes because he’d be dead before they could find a match. But Dean’s always been a stubborn jerk,” Sam gives a watery smile and runs a shaking hand through his hair before continuing, “and God, it got so bad that I thought Dad was going to lose his marbles all over again.”

“But he got a new heart, right?” Gabriel interjects. Castiel takes his eyes off Sam to turn to Gabriel to see his cousin pale and wide-eyed at the story. Obviously, he’d never heard this much about Dean and Sam’s past either and this proves to be just as big a shock for them both.

Sam nods. “Yeah, he did but it took a while though. Some kid got run over by a drunk driver. His parents agreed to donate his organs once they found out he was brain dead. Jimmy Novak. He was about our age, I think. Dean got his heart and it was rough going to get him back healthy even after that. He’d lost a ton of weight and when you get a new organ, they put you on all these drugs to suppress your immune system so you don’t reject the organ and that causes a bunch of other issues. Dad took a job as a truck driver once Dean was out of the woods for the insurance and the pay to cover the medical expenses. He’s got military benefits and stuff, but heart transplants don’t come cheap. Neither do all those meds he’ll be on for the rest of his life.”

“How the hell was he still going to school? How is he going to school now?” Gabriel asks.

Sam lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “He’s stubborn. His attendance was shit just before Dad pulled him out of school for the surgery but before that, the doctors had him stabilized most of the time by pumping him full of drugs and restricting his diet and activities. He was alright for a while before it got bad all over again and he got the new heart. Plus Mr. Shurley seems to have a soft spot for Dean; he got all his teachers to work with us and Dean did a lot of his work from home and got pretty far ahead. Dad wanted him to only go part-time now but Dean insisted that he was ready and could handle it” Sam huffs a laugh that holds no amusement, “we’ve had so many ups and downs with him, I should be used to all of this by now.”

Sam stares down at his hands in his own lap for a moment before the silence is broken by John’s shadowing looming over them. Castiel looks up and John jerks his head at the dark-haired woman standing just behind him. When he speaks, his voice is tight and drained, “This is Dr. Johnson. She’s got news about Dean.”

“Hi,” the woman says. “You can call me Tessa.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your continued patience with me! Work and school have kept me pretty busy recently, so please excuse the late update. I can’t promise an update for this coming Sunday but I’m gonna try. :)

(I'm about 100% positive there's a fair amount of typos in this chapter but I'll go back and fix those later - just wanted this posted ASAP)
Hope you enjoyed this chapter! As always, thanks for your kudos/comments/bookmarks/subscriptions!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

So I suck. Seriously. I can't believe it's been almost a freaking month since I updated. I am so, so, sorry. But like I said in one of the comments, I live the life of a procrastinator (even though I should know better) and have been putting school-stuff off until the last minute for AGES. And now that I've got less than two-weeks of classes left until finals, I'm cramming (or trying to, at least) fit school-stuff since friggin midterms into less than three weeks because I suck.

Anyway, I hope this chapter is suitable and you enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing that registers for Sam when he walks alongside his father to where Dean sleeps in his ICU cubicle is how much Dean looks like he did all those years ago when a nurse walked with him into another ICU, not too dissimilar to this one, while they waited for Bobby to arrive. Of course, Dean is larger now and his hair has lost the highlights from the sun through the winter months and Sam swallows thickly at the memories. This time, his father is just a step behind him and they’re both wearing disposable matching hospital gowns, masks, hairnets, and gloves for the sake of Dean’s compromised immune system.

Pneumonia, Tessa had declared after seemingly endless hours in the waiting room filled with frustrated huffs from Jo, Ellen’s quiet fussing, and Gabe’s attempts at reassurance. John and Bobby were completely quiet and blank-faced the entire time, appearing to have a silent conversation with one another through only pointed looks and the subtle rise and fall of their shoulders. Before Sam could even think to ask what was going on, Tessa breezed in with a folder holding Dean’s test results and Sam had been out of his chair before she could even open her mouth.

At Dean’s bedside, Sam wants to curse Dean’s stubbornness and his refusal to ask for help when he needs it like any other human being but he can’t bring himself to do more than hold back tears that prick behind his eyes from the relief of knowing that it’s not Dean’s hear this time. Pneumonia they can treat. A third heart is a feat, however, that Sam is sure even his brother couldn’t accomplish.

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It’s a little after six in the morning when Ellen finally convinces Castiel and Gabriel to go home. “It’s a school day,” she says as if Castiel actually plans on dragging himself to class while Dean could very well be dying. The thought alone is enough to make his stomach roll with nausea and Gabriel’s hand on his shoulder is a comforting weight that grounds him to reality while they walk to his car in the early morning air.

Gabriel starts the car and immediately punches the radio off when some annoying DJ’s voice blasts through the speakers. “It’s too damn early for that crap.”
Castiel nods in silent agreement.

“You think Anna cooked up some grub before she left for work this morning?”

“I’m not very hungry at the moment, Gabriel.”

Gabriel sighs as he pulls out of the parking lot. “Dean’s gonna be fine, you know that right?”

“Strange, but I didn’t hear his doctor say that. Perhaps I missed it,” Castiel snarks, turning in the passenger seat to stare out the window.

“Yeah, but she didn’t say he wasn’t going to be either,” Gabriel mutters. The car ride back home is silent save for the puttering of Gabriel’s muffler. Castiel reclines back against the recent addition of lime green seat covers in Gabriel’s car and wishes for the warm leather of the Impala’s seats that creak when he moves across the bench seat to press close to Dean or the loud rock that bleeds through the speakers whenever Dean is behind the wheel. It’s only been a short while, a blip on the radar of the time they’ve spent together but he already misses the soft touches in the backseat when they want to be alone and away from the prying eyes of siblings and cousins and friends, and the way Dean shivers when he licks across the extra-sensitive patch of skin beneath his ear and moans his name with such a lust-filled voice that Castiel’s hair raises on end. They haven’t done more than exchange heated kisses and gentle touches thus far but Castiel is more than okay with that. Their intimate moments are more than Castiel could have ever hoped for with someone like Dean and Dean seems to reciprocate that thought whenever Castiel allows himself to vocalize them.

Before he knows it, Gabriel pulls into their driveway and throws the car in park. Castiel blinks in the face of the rising sun and exhales shakily. The warm and reassuring hand returns to his shoulder and Gabriel speaks for the first time since they left the hospital. “Don’t torture yourself with thinking the worst, alright? I’ve known the Winchesters a bit longer than you and Dean’s not going down that easy.”

Castiel places his hand over Gabriel’s and allows the tears to fall.

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John thinks that it should be strange. He’s lived practically his entire life in Lawrence, save for a few years here and there, but it’s only ever really felt like home when he was with Mary and then with Mary and his boys. If he had met Mary after his tour in Vietnam, he figures he wouldn’t have bat an eye when he packed up to be sent to basic training and then abroad but growing up with a father in the service, John appreciated the safety net the continued routine and structure provided him. Even in civilian life with Mary afterwards, there was a routine – a schedule he even tried to abide by even after the birth of Dean and Sam a few short years later. But when she burned, and Dean nearly with her, it was as if every attachment to the city burned up with her. He withstood the ever-present need to run for as long as he could – the funeral, living with Bobby, trying to get his boys to adjust to a life without their mother and getting Dean talking again – before the thought of leaving for the second time slammed into him full speed. ‘Time heals all wounds’ is a saying John never would’ve put stock in in his younger days but it must be partially true at this point. The itch for the road is still there but he knows better than to put quelling that before his children again.

John is self-aware enough to know that what he did was purely in the sake of his own interest and even if he wasn’t, Ellen’s hard right hook to his eyes and Bobby’s threat with his shotgun years
down the line was all the extra convincing he needed. John’s chest constricts at the thought sitting next to Dean’s bed while Sam is at home with Ellen and Jo for a shower and a change. He’s not sure what’s worse: going to hell for nightmare he put his kids through to sort out his own shit or seeing Mary again and for her to know how miserably he failed to protect her and their family. Everything that has happened to Dean and Sam for damn near the last ten years is because he decided to leave his wife to tend to his sick son while he took the other to do something as innocent to play in a swimming pool. Because he couldn’t put his own grief and selfish desire aside to make sure his sick son took his medicine after he was discharged from the hospital.

John peals his eyes away from the heart monitor that he’s been watching faithfully for any sign of cardiac distress to look into his son’s face. After all this time, it still takes his breath away how much Dean looks like Mary. When he and Sam are dark-haired with brown eyes and a jutting jaw, Dean’s blonde hair and green eyes and the freckles that adorn his face make him look like the spitting image of his mother. It’s not as nice as it was when Dean was a boy with bright blonde locks and a perpetual bowl cut as his features have gotten more masculine with age but John still smiles as he does his best to ignore the ventilator breathing air into Dean’s lungs and the stench of antiseptic. He engulfs Dean’s hands in larger one and squeezes, taking comfort from the warmth he finds there. “I’m so sorry, son.” Dean’s eyelids flutter all too briefly and John’s almost positive he feels his hand twitch on the bed. If he chooses to take that as the first sign of forgiveness, there’s no one around to know.

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Dean’s memories from life Before Everything Went to Shit (as he calls it when the mood strikes) are so distorted with time, there are moments where he can’t tell what are actual memories or figments of his imagination. Whenever he looks at the picture of Mary by his bedside table, he smiles to himself and is grateful that he at least remember when she looked like after the all this times. Perhaps that’s because when he stares in the mirror, he can see their striking similarities stare back at him. So many things are seen through a smoky haze that it’s comforting to have something concrete to hold on to after all this time, even if it is just her picture and the wedding back that he wears on a necklace that Sam got him for Christmas as kids.

His mind is hazy and drug-filled and, as a result, he comes close to consciousness intermittently. Like trying to break through the surface of water, when he gets close to the top, he can hear voice and feel warm hands pressed into his own before he’s dragged back under again. He struggles to the top when he hears a familiar voice.

“Dean? Can you hear me, man?” Sam’s voice says in the darkness. “You’ve been out of it for almost two days, you know. Don’t you think it’s time to get your lazy ass outta bed?” Sam is silent for a while before Dean hears his sigh and, knowing his brother, he can almost see the kicked-puppy facial expression he must be wearing. “Cas was here earlier today. He was with Anna but he had to leave because she wasn’t okay with letting him miss anymore school. Don’t you think you should wake up so we don’t have to worry so much? I mean, his hair looked even worse than usual,” Sam laughs but the sound is tear-filled. “Jo’s a wreck and I don’t think I’ve ever seen Dad or Bobby so quiet. Charlie came down, too. Said she’s going out of town for a few days with her folks to see her grandma and you better have your ‘scrawny ass out of bed’ by the time she gets back so you dorks can go see Captain America together.

“Dean,” Sam pleads before he clears his throat. “I know you’re gonna be fine, though. They don’t know what we do, right? I’ve seen you down with worse than this before so I know you’re gonna be fine. You don’t have a choice.” Sam’s voice drops to a whisper and the pressure he
feels on his hand tightens as Sam give it a firm squeeze. “You’re going to Boston in the fall, Dean. How the hell did you manage to apply to frickin’ MIT and keep it a secret from me, jerk? I go home to take a shower and there’s this thick-ass envelope jammed into the mailbox with ‘CONGRATULATIONS’ stamped across the top. God, Dean. That’s so amazing! Mom would be so proud of you, Dean. That’s why I know you’re going to be alright. You can’t just leave when you finally get to follow your own dreams. I’d kick your ass if you did that. Jerk.”

Holy shit. Dean’s suddenly so very grateful for the annoying ass tube jammed down his throat because without it, he thinks that news might make him dizzy from lack of oxygen. He got in? Fuck!

Dean thinks he has a will to live that’s stronger than most. Nearly dying so many times will sort of do that to a guy. So, in his mind, he kicks his feet against the restraints keeping him just far enough away from the surface and his family and friends and Cas. He uses the last reserves of his energy to grip back at Sam’s hands before forcing his eyes open against the harsh glare of the overhead fluorescent lighting. He hears Sam’s intake of breath and the squeak of the chair being pushed away as Sam makes his way closer to his side.

“Dean?!” Around the tube in his throat, Dean does his best to give a smile that he think is more a shaky wince but the sound of Sam’s soft bark of laughter tells him that it was close enough. “Hang on, Dean. I’m gonna go find a nurse!” Sam all but runs out of the room on unsteady legs and Dean does his best to stay awake as long as he can before his eyes slide shut again and he dreams on.

Chapter End Notes

Just gonna be upfront, I cannot promise an update for next week. I'm gonna TRY but...FINALS WEEK (ewwwwwww!!!).

I hope you enjoyed it, though. The next chapter should be more Dean/Cas.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

This is chapter is shorter than usual but I really wanted to get something out. I think the next one is going to feature a lot of outside POV from John and/or Bobby so this was more of a transitional chapter. You didn't really think Dean would out of the woods just yet, did you?

ENJOY!! (and forgive my ever-present typos. I'll probably go back and edit later)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel shouldn’t be surprised that the world doesn’t stop simply because Dean’s incapacitated. That still doesn’t stop the initial moment of shock when he and Gabriel walk through the front doors of Lawrence High to see life going on as usual.

Like Dean isn’t confined to a hospital bed.

Like he hadn’t almost drowned in the fluid that filled his lungs.

Like he hadn’t almost died.

Gabriel must sense his apprehension because instead of strolling off to his own locker first like he usually would, they walk to Castiel’s together. “Cassy, I know you don’t want to be here right now but there’s nothing we can do about that now.”

Castiel sighs and stills from where he’s rummaging through his locker for his books. “You’re right. Anna’s right, much as I hate to admit it. If I miss many more classes, my parents will freak.” Castiel cracks a wry grin and looks side-long at Gabriel, “I think I would be able to hear my mother’s screaming all the way from Europe.”

Gabriel returns the grin with a clap on the shoulder. “No offense, Cas, but Aunt Naomi has always scared the shit out of me. It’s a wonder you’re only a little bit freaky. You could’ve been monumentally uncool if you went without us any longer.”

“None taken.” Castiel finishes shoving a worn textbook into his bag and turns to Gabriel with a tight expression, blue eyes darkening solemnly. “Thank you, Gabriel.”

Gabriel’s eyebrows raise and almost touch his hairline and Castiel just barely resists a smile this time. “For what?”

“Everything?” A shrug, “for this, allowing me to live with you and Anna…I can’t thank either of you enough for what you’ve done for me.”

“Castiel, stop. It’s nothing. If you had asked either one of us sooner, you’d never have gone to that stupid, hoity-toity prep school in the first place. You’re a strange little dude, but we’re glad to have you. And Dean-o’s my friend, too. So…thanks, but we didn’t really do anything we didn’t want
to do. You’re family; we’re obligated to love you. Just a little bit, though.” Gabriel smiles and his arm is a reassuring weight flung across his shoulders.

Before Castiel has a chance to respond, he sees a mop of brown hair barreling through the crowd coming their way. Sam. For a second, his heart kicks up a notch in his chest in relief. If Sam is here, Dean must be doing better. As he comes closer, Castiel barely registers Jess clinging to his arm as he uses the other to not unkindly push through the throng of students.

“Well, Cas?”

“I see – is everything alright? I mean, if you’re here – “ He misses Gabriel’s eyes dart between himself and Sam and all but forgets that two other people flank them in the hall along with a larger mass of peers outside of their immediate group.

“Jess? Accompany a gent to his locker, would you? Regale me with tales of your morning.” Gabriel asks with a raised brow. She casts a quick glance to Sam before giving him a peck on the cheek and darts quickly to wrap her long, thin arms around Castiel’s neck in a hug that he barely has time to respond to before she and Gabriel take off, arms intertwined down the hall towards Gabriel’s locker.

“Huh. Weird. Anyways, I’m here because Dad doesn’t want me missing more school.” He shrugs, “When Dean was out a lot before, I tended to be, too, so I can’t really afford any more absences or Chuck’s started to threaten me with summer school. Like I give a shit about that.”

“But…how is Dean?”

A rare smile makes its way to Sam’s face in weeks that makes Castiel’s chest swell with hope. “He woke up the other day. I’m sorry…I would’ve called because I know you were really worried but everything’s been so hectic and crazy and I…I’m sorry.”

Castiel fervently shakes his head but a smile still tugs at the corner of his lips, “No, no. I understand. He woke up?”

“Yeah,” Sam breathes. “I was telling him how I found out the jerk applied to MIT but kept it all a secret for everyone but you, I’m guessing, and that he got accepted! Shit, man. I always knew that Dean was smart but MIT is huge, y’know? And he just…woke up. By the time I had come back with a nurse, he had already konked out again, the lazy ass, but still. That’s something, right?”

“Yes. Yes, that is something indeed.”

He walks Sam to his first period class, talking all the way about his plans for after graduation now that he and Dean will both be in Boston together because Castiel has no doubts now that things are going to be fine. He silently wills the clock to go faster so that he can make his way to the hospital after school and perhaps catch a glimpse of Dean.

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Dean is incapable of registering the passage of time anymore. The few times he has been able to
pull his eyelids apart, his vision is so blurry that he cannot see more than a few inches in front of his face, let alone the shitty clock that hangs on the wall on the other side of the room. The only indication that he can identify is by craning his head to face the large window where the blinds are drawn and he watches as either the sun hangs high in the sky or the moon.

He barely registered the voices murmuring softly beside him after a while. They faded away into a peaceful rush of sound, like waves pounding on the beach. What he did notice, though, was how hot the room had gotten. It gave him flashes of before, him being sprawled on his bedroom floor with Sam staring down at him with wide and wet eyes and Dean had been so sure, so sure, that he was burning – that the house was burning down around them again and he needed to get his little brother out like he wasn't able to do for his mother all those years ago.

Sam wasn’t here now. He’d recognize his giant little brother’s stupid hair and nagging voice telling him to wake up no matter how blurry everything felt.

He was just so hot.

Sometime later, Dean didn’t know, but a cool cloth was pressed to his head and he turned toward the sensation, seeking relief from the overbearing and oppressive heat and he shivered.

A rough hand rubbed at his cheek and Dean opened his eyes. In a surprising moment of clarity, Dean recognized the face as Bobby’s even behind the hospital mask and smiled. His eyes looked tired and red-rimmed and he looked so different without his ratty trucker hat adorning his head. He wanted to ask Uncle Bobby why he looked so out of it, why Dean felt so out of it, but his words were muffled by the oxygen mask.

He was so tired.

His eyes slipped shut once again and everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

I am so super sorry for the delay in updating this! It started as being, "BLURGH! finals week will eat my soul!" (BUT it didn't...I even managed to ace physics. Hell must be freezing over at this very moment because...talk about unexpected).

Then, it was wall, "YAAAYYYY SUMMER!! *party, graduation party, end-of-the-semester party* takes a minute to breathe *selfie, selfie, selfie, party, party, party, #YOLO* because freedom and warm weather and fruity drinks.

Then I was all, "need nap. must take several naps."

And now we're here. So. Yeah. Sorry.

I'll try to update again soon.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Short update but primarily John and Bobby POV.

(I haven't proofread this beyond giving it a cursory glance so forgive any and all typos)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bobby Singer may have been a man that never fathered any children of his own, despite his late wife’s desire to before passing, but he likes to think that over the years, he willingly inherited three pain in the ass kids all his own. Jo, who’s on father had passed when she was still in pigtails had become the daughter he never knew he wanted. He and Sam, despite his resounding similarities to his blockhead of a father, was a sweet, smart boy that still hid his eyes behind too-long hair much like he did as a boy, even though he towers over Bobby (and most others in a room) by now. And Dean. Dean, who’s brash and boisterous nature could light up a room blinded by darkness. Dean, who Bobby was sick and tired of seeing lying pale as a ghost in a hospital bed when he was only 18 damn years old.

He tries not to think about the time he missed with those boys when John was too busy running from his own grief and anyone that cared about them but it’s hard to do when his back is pressed against the wall of the hospital while the doctors work on quieting the monitors that blare and announce Dean’s distress because he can’t seem to shake this fever. It’s hard not to be pissed as all hell at John for taking half his family away when the rational part of his brain knows that John is probably just as pissed at himself. He’s never spoken the words aloud to anyone, not even to himself, but he can’t seem to silence that voice whispering in the back of his mind that had John not run off with his kids in tow and disappeared into the wind, it would’ve never gotten this bad for Dean.

Bobby’s a foolish man, but he doesn’t have a death wish and he’s not cruel enough to utter those words to even an empty hallway for fear of John hearing the thoughts. It’s not worth it. So, he squeezes his eyes shut against the harsh glow of the overhead lights in the hallway and the obtrusive stench of anti-septic that permeates the air and pointedly ignores the shouts and blaring machinery in the room just behind him. He knows he needs to get John, but he needs to steady his nerves and his own knees first before he can pull himself away and make a move. Dean needs his father and his brother and his boyfriend and Bobby will be damned if his own fool heart is going to deny his boy a damned thing, least of all what might keep him tethered here.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that something is wrong when Bobby shakily makes his way into the ICU waiting lobby. His face is pale and he’s wringing his ragged trucker hat between two tightly clenched hands and John thinks and fears for the worst immediately.

“What?” He moves from his chair faster than a man his age should be able to do and his at Bobby’s side in an instant. “What, Singer?!” His voice bellows out into the quiet of the waiting area and not for the first time, John is grateful that they are the only family there. However, hospital staff still pitter around – nurses and the like getting the cheapest and closest coffee fix and the vending machines and janitorial staff emptying out trash bins – and they all seem to flinch at
the harshness of his town.

“I don’t know what happened but I think his fever’s spiked. He was fittin’ when they dragged me out of the room, John,” Bobby’s voice is a whisper but it punches the air out of John’s lungs nonetheless. He jerks back away from Bobby like the man laid a physical blow and stumbles into a chair, hiding his face behind his hands. Above him, Bobby clears his throat and there’s the sound of fabric rustling as he roots in his pocket for his phone. “I’m gonna go give Sam and the girls a call. They should be here.”

John thinks that he nods but he’s not sure. There’s the sound of retreating footsteps as Bobby’s boots lead him away and then silence and John’s never wanted to scream so badly in all his life.

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Sam barrels through the lobby doors like a force of nature with Castiel hot on his heels. Despite the still-cold weather, the two of them are covered in a thin sheet of sweat and equally pail and pinched expressions on their face. “Dad!” Sam hollers.

John stretches himself up from his chair and places an unsteady hand on Sam’s shoulders and gives a nod to Castiel before speaking, “we haven’t heard anything since Bobby’s called you. Ellen’s out trying to see if she can get some information but…”

“I want to see him!” Sam declares and at his side, Castiel tenses and looks down to the floor. For the first time since all this started, John takes stock of the boy and sees that his expression is identical to the others in the room all there for Dean. He thinks, briefly, that while all this is hard of all of them, at least they’ve had a chance to see for themselves that Dean is alive and fighting while Castiel has only had to rely on word of mouth. He swallows and thinks to himself that if nothing else, he can give his son and the boy he loves a moment together when they both are probably desperate for it. He’s not that far removed from youth and can remember being young and longing so badly for Mary when they were separated by the Great Plains for basic training and oceans when he was in the trenches continents over. And really, Dean’s fighting his own war right now, right? This is the least he can do.

After a momentary lull, Tessa walks into the room with Ellen behind her with a victorious gleam in her eyes. They all draw themselves up and walk towards her before she can even open her mouth.

“What’s wrong with my boy, Tessa?”

“It seems the antibiotics we have him on aren’t working as well as we’d hoped and his temperature spiked high enough to cause a seizure.” She ignores the gasps of the people around her and continues, “we’ve got him on a new regimen that we believe will be more effective this time around. He’s been stabilized and started on anti-convulsants and we’ve also pack his armpits and groin area with icepacks to make sure his temperature stays down while we give the meds a chance to work.”
“And until then?”

“It’s another waiting game. I’m sorry, I know this is hard for you all but Dean is fighting.”

“What about his heart?” Bobby asks.

“Well, we’ve also got him on all his regular meds for the organ that he’d take at home and his cardiologist has been consulting with me on methods of treatment since Dean was admitted. It’s faring well, but that’s why we can’t let this fever get any higher. It can put a strain on his heart so we’re working on reducing his temperature slowly and steadily so he doesn’t go into shock. We are cautiously optimistic that Dean can get through this without posing any cardiac problems. We’ve got him stabilized now, like I said, so if one of you want to go sit with him for a moment, you’re more than welcome to as long as you remember proper procedure.” Sam’s off like a rocket before anyone can get a chance to so much as blink. The atmosphere of the room lightens with their seemingly simultaneous exhalations of relief. John nods and when Tessa turns to walk away, the reaches out for her and ushers her into a quiet corner of the lobby.

When Sam makes his way back to the lobby, he’s furiously wiping at his eyes in a futile attempt to conceal his tears. He flops down in a chair and John watches the longing expression that flitters across Castiel’s eyes and he knows in that moment that his decision was the right one.

“Castiel,” he calls. The boys jerks up in his seat and blinks blue eyes owlishly at John. John jerks his head, beckoning him over and Castiel obliges.

“Sir?”

“I know you know that visitation for patients in the ICU is for immediate family only and –”

“Are you asking me to leave?” His eyes widen in dread and John quickly shakes his head to calm the boy.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. Just listen, kid.” At Castiel’s nod, John continues. “It’s family only but I talked to Tessa and as my nephew, you should be able to sit with Dean, too.”

Castiel’s brow furrows and his head tilts curiously and John barely resists the urge to shake the boy until it dawns on him what John’s trying to say. “I am not your nephew.”

“Jesus, kid. Look, I know that and you know that but the hospital staff here only knows what we tell them. Do you get what I’m saying here?”

John watches as realization dawns on Castiel and his face brightens like John hasn’t seen since Dean’s birthday party at the Roadhouse. “Oh. You mean you –”

“Yes. So in the eyes of the staff here, you and Dean are cousins and not the kissing kind. If you can keep the PDA to a minimum you can –”

“I can see him!” John nods. Castiel launches himself and the man and hugs him furiously muttering a litany of thanks.

John gently pushes Castiel away and walks with him down the hallway to Dean’s room informing him of the proper procedure for visiting someone in a clean room and before they know it, they’re standing at the threshold to Dean’s door while Castiel secures his mask and hair net. John ties the gown behind his back snuggly and looks down to see Castiel’s eyes swimming as he looks on at his son. John does his damnedest not to cast more than glance into the room for fear that he’ll
change his mind and want to occupy all of Dean’s time while he’s there. He pats Castiel’s shoulder reassuringly and turns to leave.

“Thank you, Mr. Winchester,” Castiel says.

“No problem, kid. Just…go see my boy.” Castiel nods like he’s taken a solemn vow and enters the room.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so very sorry about the lag in updating this. The excuse at the end of the last update applies in the case as well. Working + summer + naps + life = lag in updates. I hope to have the next one up soon. I don't know how many chapters are left in this story but there's not much left to go. I had originally had it in my to go until Dean's graduation but given that the story is currently in February/March right now and it's at the high point of drama and angst, that would leave, like, two months of filler, essentially. So, yeah. I haven't decided where to end it or whether to use fast forwards to jump to graduation or jump straight to Boston or whatevs. But it shouldn't be much longer now because I really wanna start working on another Dean/Cas story that I've mentioned in the comments previously (another sick!Dean with Cas, Gabe, Benny, Sam, etc., etc. but Dean's illness isn't going to be the central driving force of the drama in that one). Anyways.../endrambling.

Hope you guys enjoyed the update!

But that finale? Oh, me oh my! I've watched the last half hour or so about 6 times by now (that a lie, it's more than 6 but I don't want you to judge me). Hellatus is going to be rough!
Chapter Notes

Short chapter is short but...it's here! I'll go over for typos sometime later today/tomorrow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel doesn’t know what to expect when he sees Dean for the first time. All he knows for sure is that the sight before him is not it.

Dean hasn’t been hospitalized long but all the color has been stripped from his face except the fever-induced rosy flush to his cheeks. IVs and electrodes are connected to most of his visible skin that lead up to clear bags of fluid and a heart monitor with a temperature reading that, even without being forced to binge watch Dr. Sexy MD, he would know is still too high. His hair is matted with sweat on the top of his head and his eyes rove around unseeingly under their lids. Castiel creeps gingerly to the bed, as if Dean is merely sleeping. A chair sits off to the side, just underneath a window, and Castiel gets a flash of John or Sam or even Bobby without his (apparently) trademark trucker hat on his head, pensively watching over Dean. Castiel perches there as well and sits unmoving in the still room.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Castiel sits forward in the chair and rests his gloved hand over Dean’s hand that is free of his IV drips. From this angle, Castiel has full view of the scar that runs down Dean’s chest where his hospital-issue robe lies open with electrodes dotting the skin there. He’s seen it before, during the rare moment where Dean has allowed him to touch without being swathed in layers and layers of fabric but never so openly.

“You do realize that if you miss any more days of school at this point, you’ll have to go in the summer – even after the graduation ceremony. And waiting on you to get home from school in the middle of July does not sound like a good summer to me, Dean. I was hoping, well, that you would be up to a road trip,” Castiel says with a smile. He thinks back to the folded-up map that sits snuggly in the glove compartment of the Impala dotted with places that Dean wants to see or memorable places from his life on the road before. “It would, naturally, have to end in Boston since that is where we will need to be, come August. Although, I’m not so certain your father will be easily convinced about whether that is a good idea or not... especially now. So, you need to wake up soon and for longer than a few seconds this time. I miss you.”

Castiel spends the rest of his visit with Dean in much the same way – talking about his plans for them over the summer and all the places he would like to see across the country and all the information he’s researched about Boston and their respective universities. He alternates between holding Dean’s hand and brushing stray strands of hair from his face but he doesn’t stop talking in the hopes that Dean will find comfort in his voice as well as his touch.

When Castiel stands to leave, he takes a final look at the monitor above Dean’s head and notices with a faint and hopeful smile that Dean’s temperature has already begun to go down.
When Dean wakes, he is groggy and disoriented and his throat is dry as a desert. Not to mention, there’s a taste so foul he has to wonder briefly if something crawled in there and *died* while he was…sleeping? And like *that* everything that’s happened in the last However Many Days comes rushing back to him and he starts. The monitor above his head beeps a little louder and a little faster before dark hair and familiar blue eyes find themselves in his field of vision.

“Dean? You have to calm down.” Cas must be a friggin’ mind reader because like magic he disappears and returns with a cup of cool water that he holds carefully to Dean’s lips. “Small sips, Dean.” Dean only barely manages to resist rolling his eyes because as wiped out as he feels, small sips are all he can manage right now.

When Cas pulls the cup away, Dean clears his throat and reaches out to grab his hand in his own with a small smile. “Hey, Cas.”

“Hello, Dean.”

Chapter End Notes

It's been almost two months since this has been updated and I am so sorry. I was having some serious computer issues and all-out battles with Geek Squad.

Long story short, my hard drive on my laptop had to be replaced twice and they had to ship it out both times to get it done and I’ve lost a good deal of info that was saved on this sucker that I didn't get a chance to back up (that includes this fic and what I had done that wasn't yet posted. UGH!). I was going through some serious computer withdrawals. So tragic.

But this is something, yes? There's only a few more chapters to go!!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Short chapter is short.
Also hasn't been proofed for errors yet. Whoops!
But it's a break from the angst so...there's that!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam thinks, rubbing at his temple in a futile attempt to stave off a migraine that his family must thrive in chaos. As absurd as it sounds, even to himself, the Winchesters are so much more… peaceful when shit is about to hit the fan.

He’s more ecstatic than he can express that over the past four days since Dean woke up for real that he seems to be getting stronger. There’s been hopeful speculation from Tessa and the nurses that tend to him that he might even get out of the ICU soon if he keeps responding this well to treatment. But seriously? This is ridiculous. Of course it would take less than a week for all that love-y, chick-flick moments to descend into a flaming bag of dog shit that resulted in Bobby all but dragging John out of his room leaving a fuming Dean, a flustered Cas, and an irritated Sam behind. Of fucking course.

“Something is seriously wrong with our family that it takes you almost dying for Dad to decide to find a job closer to home only for you to spring on him that you want to move to the other side of the country.”

“Is there a point you’re trying to make or are you just okay with sitting around and recapping what just happened five seconds ago?” Dean’s still pale and a bit weak from the pneumonia and sometimes the pain meds that he’s on make him a bit loopy but after what Sam just witnessed, Dean is definitely in a mood. Not that he can blame him, but still.

“Dad just completely flipped his lid, Dean!”

“So you’re gonna go with recapping then? Good to know where we stand, Sam.” Sam not Sammy. Great, now Dean’s halfway to being pissed at him, too.

“You almost died, Dean. You can’t be surprised that Dad reacted the way he did. Come on.”

“Oh, this role reversal is a trip. Me fighting with Dad and you playing devil’s advocate? Someone must have slipped something into my IV when I wasn’t looking.”

“Dean,” Cas says quietly and Dean practically deflates from his place propped up on the bed. Sam, with all the glee of an obnoxious younger brother, stores that little nugget of information away for a later discussion where he will mock Dean endlessly.

“Did you – did you have to tell him now of all times? That’s all I want to know.”

“I didn’t tell him jack. Cas and I were talking about everything and he must’ve overheard.”

“Christ,” Sam says, although the word is muttered as he drags a gloved hand down his face. His
brother was accepted to MIT with a full ride despite applying late. That is a huge deal and under normal circumstances, Sam can picture how proud John would be at the accomplishment. But the Winchesters haven’t done anything close to ‘normal’ since the fire all those years ago.

“Like they don’t have cardiologists in Boston…this is fucking ridiculous, Sam.”

“Boy, you had better watch that mouth of yours,” a gruff voice from the doorway says.

“Where’s Dad?” Dean asks.

“I left him outside sulking with Ellen so I could come check on you three idjits.”

“I resent that, seeing as how I have done nothing wrong,” Cas says from Dean’s side. Dean’s head whips around so fast it’s a wonder he doesn’t get whiplash. “Dude, seriously?” he asks, to which Cas simply shrugs innocently.

“So he’s still pissed?” Sam asks, ignoring the betrayed glare the Dean is shooting his boyfriend. Undoubtedly it’d look more menacing if he didn’t look pale as a ghost, but still. Whatever.

“What do you think? When have you ever known your daddy to let something go?” At their silence, Bobby (sans his trucker hat which, weird!) walks to a chair in the corner of the room and drops down into it. “You have to pick now of all times to tell that man that you and that boy behind you plan on moving to Boston?”

“That’s what I said!”

“Quiet, Sam,” Bobby says at the same time Dean tells him to ‘shut the fuck up’. “You know we’re all proud of you, boy, and we’ll celebrate at the Roadhouse when your ass gets out of this place but your timing is terrible.”

“I didn’t tell him! He overheard me and Cas talking about it.”

“You going to MIT, too?” Bobby turns to ask Castiel.

“No, sir. I was accepted to Brandeis.”

“Huh, sounds fancy. Congrats to you both.”

“Thank you,” Castiel says sincerely with a nod. Bobby draws Castiel into a discussion about Brandeis and his plans for the future and the other boy beams with excitement. Dean watches them with a barely contained grin and Sam rolls his eyes before falling into another empty chair.

During a lull in their conversation, Sam looks over to find Dean slumped over in sleep snoring quietly. “Let’s let the boy get some rest, you two. And save your dad from Ellen.”

Sam’s shoulders slump as they walk to the door. He knows that even though Dean and John aren’t even going to be in the same freaking building, he’s going to get his ear chewed off bloody listening to John go on and on and on about how ‘hell will freeze over’ before he lets Dean so much as leave his sight once he’s out of the hospital. He casts one last quick glance at his brother as Castiel whispers his goodbyes and thinks about just how lucky he is.

When two sets of eyes turn to meet him, he realizes he must’ve said that last part out loud. “Why is Dean so lucky?” Castiel asks.

“Because he can pretend to fall asleep to get out of talking to Dad again tonight. Jerk.”
Dean’s lips twitch slightly and when Bobby and Cas have left the room, he turns to lean against the door jam just in time to hear Dean mutter quietly, “bitch,” with his eyes still closed.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the lag in updating! I think I’ve been in the midst of a quarter-life crisis or something right now. I graduate college in December and holyshit! when is someone going to come and tell me what I’m supposed to do with the rest of my life?!?!! ง(‘paces)ง
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Good grief, it's been almost a month since I updated?! Sorry! Life happened. Blah

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One thing that Dean actively hates about being in the hospital is the constant stream of drugs that are steadily being pumped into his veins that seem like so much more than his cocktail at home. He sleeps often and uneasily throughout the entire day and when he wakes, he feels no more refreshed than he did before he drifted off to sleep. Before he opens his eyes, he wriggles a bit in the bed and scrunches his face in discomfort at the catheter the nurses and Tessa insists he still wears – too weak to even get out of the bed to go to the bathroom. He grunts and opens his eyes, digging his fist into the left one when it sticks.

There’s a chuckle from the now darkened corner of the room, Dean realizes and he drops his hand to squint at the voice. “You used to do that all the time when you were a baby, too. Always hated being put down for a nap but waking you up was a bitch some days.”

When Dean’s eyes adjust to the darkness of the room, he tenses up at the sight of his father sitting sprawled out in one of the chairs that his family has managed to commandeer during his stay. His visitors no longer have to wear the masks or gloves to sit with him, but Tessa still insists on the gowns, hair nets, and rigorous hand washing before they are permitted to enter the room. Without the mask, Dean can clearly see the downturn of John’s lips and the tight way he’s holding his mouth. Dean drags himself up straighter in bed, reading for a second round. The heart monitor he’s wearing alerts the room to his heightened state of anxiety and John’s expression morphs from a mixture of wariness and frustration to one of pure worry. He’s out of the chair and at Dean’s bed side in an instant, warm hand resting on Dean’s shoulder, pushing him back down to the bed.

“Relax, Dean.” Dean tries to comply, forcing his breathing to steady and his heart rate to slow when he hears John mutter a curse under his breath. “Can’t even get through a conversation and you expect me to be okay with you and that boyfriend of yours packing up and moving across the country?”

Dean barely suppresses a scowl as he looks over to his father. “There are hospitals and cardiologists in Boston. And I wouldn’t exactly qualify this any ol’ ‘discussion’, Dad. Would you?”

John heaves a sigh and sits down gingerly on the edge of Dean’s bed as he lets his eyes travel around the expanse of medical equipment around the room. Dean no longer needs to be on a steady stream of oxygen, but there’s a mask hanging just above the head of the bed, ready for use. There are bags of fluids that run into IV’s taped onto the back of his head, a heart monitor, and some other crap that Dean’s not all that interested in. He leaves his attention resting squarely on John, willing his father to understand.

“I’m proud of you, Dean. I know I don’t say it enough, but kid, I am so proud of you. And I know your mother would be, too. I just – I don’t feel comfortable with you packing up and moving when you couldn’t even make it through a year back in high school. You didn’t even tell me you were applying! You had to know that I wouldn’t let this shit fly.”
“Do you even hear yourself? ‘This shit’ is a full ride to one of the best colleges in the country, Dad. Any other parent would be shitting themselves over it right about now, not trying to stop me from going. I already talked to Tess about it and she’s even given me a list of docs out there to contact in the fall. I can’t just let this go, Dad. Don’t ask me to.”

“I’m not asking, Dean. Besides, your family is all here. There’s school a hell of a lot closer to home that you can go to that are just fine.”

“But they aren’t MIT, Dad! Why don’t you get that? And most of family is getting ready to scatter in the wind at first jump so why do I have to be the one that’s stuck here? Sammy’s been prattling on about Stanford since middle school and we both know he’ll get in, Jo’s already been accepted to NYU, Gabe’s going to culinary school, Cas is going to Boston and I’m going with him.”

“Dean – “

“No!” Dean interrupted, “I have lived way too long, since that goddamn day in the parking lot, just accepting the fact that I don’t have a future like everyone else – just waiting for someone to tell me that something else has gone wrong and to get ready to kick it. I finally get the chance to feel like I do have a future and a life outside of this small town and this fucking hospital and I’m not walking away from it because it makes you feel uncomfortable. Don’t ask me to do that. If you do, you might as well have let me die all those years ago because everything after that was pointless. Face it, Dad! There’s no point in being alive anymore if you won’t let me live my life because you’re too afraid of it!” At the end of his rant, Dean is seething and clenching his fist around his bed sheets so hard that his hand begins to ache. John simply stares at him with a tight and unreadable expression before giving a resigned nod that is almost imperceptible in the darkened hospital room. He stands swiftly, shoulders tense, “good night, Dean. Get some rest, you look tired,” before turning and exiting the room.

Dean sleeps, as requested, but does so uneasily.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is quite a bit shorter than I originally intended, but I really liked it focusing on the John and Dean angst that will (eventually) be resolved later on. Hope you enjoyed it!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Super short update but there’s another one in the chamber from Cas’s POV coming up soon.

Also, school’s started back up and it’s my last semester of undergrad (yay!) but still enough work to keep me seriously busy along with my job so...that explains the lack of updates. :/

Dean was previously unaware of how fucking exhausting it is to get over pneumonia. There are occasional “bursts” of energy where he’s able to have a conversation with his family or flirt with Cas or a nurse for an extra jello cup but most of the time, he’s completely worn out. He knows it’s normal, Tessa had already reassured him of that, but it was still worrying and all too familiar of another time when he could hardly keep his eyes open. He even slept through the newest episode of Dr. Sexy MD and Sam took great pleasure in mocking him for that.

Slowly but surely, however, strength returns to Dean for more than a few moments. He’s no longer in the ICU and a nurse named Gadreel comes every so often to get Dean out of bed and walking the hallways. The first time Dean stepped foot outside of his hospital room under his own power, he’d almost cried. Gadreel took the hint and ignored the few tears that managed to escape Dean’s control and Dean was eternally grateful to the man for that. (He cried again - like a big freakin’ girl - when Jo and Charlie were finally able to visit but they seemed to be too caught up in bawling themselves to notice or say anything.)

Two and a half weeks after the conversation with his father, Dean is released from the hospital. Things are tense and everyone seems to have picked up on it rather quickly. John’s still very clearly pissed about the whole thing and their interactions have been limited strictly to talking about how Dean’s feeling and if he’s been eating. Sam and Bobby seem to have taken it amongst themselves to not let Dean and John be in the same room alone for too long, worried no doubt that another incident will occur. During the day when Sam and Cas are in school, Bobby parks himself in one of the empty chairs in the corner of Dean’s room and pointedly clears his throat whenever Dean let’s his mouth fly or John gets that telltale vein that throbs in the middle of his forehead when he’s close to getting riled up. Sam, for his part, just doesn’t seem to shut up long enough for anyone else to get a word in edgewise. As annoying as it is that his family is taking their patented way out of talking about things by simply not talking about them, he’s at least grateful for the effort. And knowing that he’ll be getting out of the hospital soon is enough to put Dean in an almost perpetually good mood.

The Saturday morning that Dean is to be released, he’s greeted by John with Sam and Cas trailing just behind him, both beaming. He’s already dressed in the clothes they brought him the day before and stands swiftly and eagerly.

“We good to go, right? Right?”

Sam rolls his eyes in exasperation while John moves to grab Dean’s duffel bag but Cas only
“Chuckles. ‘Dad already got your new meds and talked to Tessa so now we’ve just got to wait on one of the nurses to come with the wheelchair.’”

“Wheelchair?”

“Dean,” Sam says, with that little bitchface expression that he gets, “you’ve been through this enough times already to know the rules.”

“But I’ve been pacing these halls all day for forever. I don’t need no stinkin’ wheelchair!”

“Well, I’m afraid you don’t really have much of a say in the matter, Dean. Hospital policy and all.” Dean turns to the door and Gadreel’s standing in the doorway with a stupid freakin’ wheelchair that Dean glares at. “Perhaps if you keep staring at it, it’ll burst into flames. But then I’d only go get another one after that and you’d be in the same boat. Or chair, as it were.”

“I hate you, I hate you all - except Cas,” Dean grumbles before plopping himself down in the chair and gives a crooked grin in answer to Cas’s smile. The walk to the Impala is silent, Sam and John walking ahead with Sam casting nervous little glances at Dean every so often like he could just vanish at any moment, and Cas a constant presence at his side.

Dean, for the first time that he can recall, opts out of his usual shotgun seat in order to sit in the back with Cas. He ignores Sam’s bugged look and John just seems to ignore them all, but Dean can easily forget that where he’s sitting in the back with Cas with their thighs pressed against one another’s. “I’m glad you’re here, Cas,” Dean whispers.

“As am I, Dean.”

When they pull up to the house, there’s a large banner with ‘WELCOME HOME, DEAN!’ scrawled across it hanging over their porch. Bobby’s car is parked in their driveway along with Gabriel, so they park the Impala on the street. When Dean’s righted himself after climbing from the backseat, his father’s hand is heavy and warm on his shoulder. His expression is tight and stormy. “Welcome home, son,” is all he says before his voice cracks a bit and he pulls Dean into a tight embrace. Sam and Cas have already started the short trek up the walkway to the front door, seemingly all too aware of the scene behind them.

Dean returns the hug just as tightly. “Thanks, Dad.”

“You know we’ve still got stuff to talk about, right? After all of this?”

Dean gives a nod.

“Good. Come on, there’s some people waiting to see you.”

Chapter End Notes
Just a touch of resolution between John and Dean?

And this was mostly just to get Dean home and out of the hospital finally (?). He and Cas have a very important talk in the next chapter about their future and the nature of their relationship.
not a chapter but you should read anyway

This work is being re-tooled here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/2797361/chapters/627944

An explanation is posted there also.

Thanks for reading, guys. I hope you continue to do so. :)

End Notes

There's no regular update schedule for this story, but I know where I want it to go so updates will be timely.

(Excuse my shamelessness, but reviews are greatly appreciated!)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!