Plus One

by ceeaintherforthath

Summary

Castiel Novak might have to attend three weddings in two months, but he’s not about to let his brother play matchmaker. His family’s Internet streaming company is too important to let a relationship steal his time, but he knows exactly what to do—hire someone to pretend to be his boyfriend.

Dean Winchester has worked five-star hospitality long enough to know how to fit in with Castiel’s crowd, and this job could score him the connections to make his acting career take off. It’s a business deal, no matter how they’re drawn to each other. When the lines of their contract start to blur into real feelings, can they withstand Castiel’s family and jealous fans working to split them up?

Notes

I could not have produced this work without excellent feedback and ruthless editing from Messier_51, Defiler_Wyrm, mittensmorgul, and casblues. There were so many times I was convinced this whole story was an absolute mess and they talked me out of it.
The art is a wonder. Casblues worked so closely with me to produce art that highlights really special moments throughout the story. I was so lucky to be chosen by her.
Dean Winchester hadn't been late to an audition in twelve years, and he wasn't going to let Seattle traffic win. Not even the parking meter that only took American coins would stop him. Dean ran down the crowded sidewalk and a Canadian dime slipped out of his hand. It rolled away, abandoned. He had five minutes to check into the Novak building’s lobby and he was going to make it.

Pedestrians staring at phones or tourist maps clogged the crosswalk. Dean dodged them, each running step one yard closer to the smoked glass tower that held his future.

“Mommy!”

The scream stopped Dean in his tracks. He searched the crowd, drawn to a space adults wove around after looking away.

“Mommy!” That was a little girl’s high voice, fried with fear and tears, and no one was helping her. Dean looked at his watch.

He had three minutes.

Damn it, it's a kid.

Dean turned back.

A tiny girl with eight braids sprouting from her head cried alone in the street. Tears tracked down her face. Dean crouched, one knee on the sidewalk, and took her sticky brown hand. “Hey, honey. Hey. What are you doing here?”

“Want Mommy.”
People flicked curious glances at them, but no one stopped. No mother appeared to save her. She squeezed two of Dean's fingers and didn't let go.

“What's your name? I'm Dean.”

“Keisha.”

“Were you in the coffee place?” He pointed to the familiar green and white sign, just a little way up the street.

“Coffee,” she said.

“Come with me, okay? We're going to find your mommy.” He scooped Keisha up and settled her on his left hip. She buried her hands in his leather jacket, rested her smeared cheek on his shoulder. It was up to him now. He had to be her hero.

The scent of brewing coffee spilled out of the open door. Dean ducked in, looking around. A man in a green apron pointed to him, and a blonde woman in yoga wear rushed forward to take the child in her arms.

“Mommy, you're squishing me,” Keisha complained.

The woman laughed through her tears, rocking her child back and forth. “I just took my eyes off her for a second.”

“Kids are escape artists,” Dean said. “No harm done.”

She gave him a watery, grateful smile. “How can I thank you?”

“No need,” Dean said. “Take care, now.”

He slipped out of the Starbucks, pretending not to hear the manager calling after him. Pedestrian traffic split around him as he checked the time. Hope tumbled to the concrete: the minute hand on his watch stuck straight up.

Dean Winchester was late for an audition for the first time in twelve years.

He'd come to Seattle on hope and a loan. Alfie took his lunch shift, but he had to be at Hy's for the dinner rush in five hours and this audition was a bust before he even got in the door. He'd blown it. But that little girl needed help, and he wouldn't change what he’d done if he could have those five minutes back.

Security asked for his name and escorted him to an elevator that whisked him to the 22nd floor. A table with a massive vase of white, star-petaled lilies took up the middle of a semi-circular room. His bootheels scuffed over the pale wood floor, bearing left to greet a woman who waited with a silver-backed tablet. High platformed heels made her tall enough to look him in the eye, and she tossed a thick veil of dark brown hair over her shoulder with a smile.

“Dean Winchester?”

Dean gave her a smile right back and studied her burgundy painted lips before answering. “Yes. Sorry, I'm late.”

She gestured at him to follow her. “We're running behind, you're okay.”

Hope melted the tension in his stomach. They hadn't called him yet.
He would be thirty in nine months. He was on the bubble at Hy's after taking three days to shoot a werewolf script. Crowley had urged him to take the time for this call, believing it was something big. Maybe it was. He still had a chance.

The woman opened the door on a conference room, showing him to a seat with a script. Another actor sat at the table, a blond and blue-eyed surfer type. He flicked a look at Dean and dismissed him.

The woman gestured at the surfer guy to follow her through a door while Dean turned to his script. He was reading for a guy named Chet—Dean built up an image of him, deciding his history, circumstances, personality. The lines filled him with excitement. Chet had more lines on one page than Dean had ever performed in a gig. This wasn't a three line speaking part. This was a role.

Dean turned the page and read on, finding the hook in the story: Chet was a stranger at a family wedding, and his date was a guy. Dean went back to the beginning and read again, fitting that knowledge into his image. He could feel Chet. He could do this, and let it shape his career, why not? Actors could be out. John Barrowman and Neil Patrick Harris were; he could be too.

The door opened, and surfer guy gave him a smirk as he walked out. Dean rolled his eyes. Shit actors tried to demoralize the competition and he didn't give a damn about anyone's performance but his own. He stood up and buttoned his jacket. Eye contact. Smile. Say their names.

He stepped across the threshold and nearly stumbled. The little gods of drama made him late to audition in front of Ezekiel Fraser, Oscar winning director of The Baseball Cards, and Castiel Novak, the boss of television production at NetWatch. They had final say on every show NetWatch produced, and he might have just blown his chances for the entire network. The fact that it was them made his heart trip hard—this was a big deal, if they were handling the casting.

Never mind that. Tall and relaxed. Confident. Own the room.

He found his mark and stood still while everyone got a good look at him. He smiled at the woman who'd led him here, murmuring, “I'm Dean.”

“Ava.” She smiled and went back to studying her script.

Ezekiel settled into a tall chair next to Castiel. “Thank you for coming. Will you slate?”

Dean didn't look at the camera. “My name is Dean Winchester, and my agent is Fergus Crowley.”

He had to ignore Castiel. He had to stop looking at his eyes. He picked up a Starbucks cup with elegant hands, long fingered and dextrous. Stop looking. Dean trained his gaze at a spot between Ezekiel Fraser's shoulder and the rolling camera.

He still had a chance. He was going after it.

Ezekiel nodded. “Action.”

Ava kept her eyes on the page as she read, “So, how did you meet my brother?”

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Castiel picked up his paper cup and tested the latte's temperature on his fingertips. It warmed his hand through the white and green cardboard: still hot, but not enough to scald his tongue. He sipped and the guy from Starbucks took his mark.
This was the fifth audition. Ava had made good choices, each man handsome and skilled, but they'd been wiped away by the gorgeous guy who had stopped a mother's nightmare when he came in with her missing child on his hip. Castiel stared and had forgotten to put sugar in his drink. He went upstairs with a bitter brew, wishing he'd stepped forward to thank him. That he'd talked to him. Got a closer look at his hazel-green eyes, high cheekbones, and that mouth--

But here he was, like a second chance.

“Action,” Zeke said.

Before the slate, Dean cradled the room in his presence. At Ezekiel's command, he transformed. He became Chet, a nervous-but-hiding-it young man on a tightrope of a first date: the escort of a man who’d chosen his brother's wedding to come out.

Ava read her first line with her head ducked toward the clipboard, inflection flat as Kansas. It rattled the rookies, flushed out the unskilled. Castiel held his breath, waiting for Dean's response.

Dean fit into the role like a glove. Ava looked up from her clipboard and spoke her lines with more life. Dean made a self-deprecating joke and Ava touched his arm. They made it to the end of the script and Dean didn't stop, tapping his foot to an unheard song. Dean smiled shyly and asked Ava to dance.

They were in a hold before Ezekiel called out, “Cut. Thank you, we'll let you know.”

Dean's presence unfurled with his smile. “Thank you,” he said, and walked out.

Castiel waited for a beat after the door closed. “Him.”

Ezekiel reviewed the footage of Dean's audition, as if his camera relationship mattered. “There are eight more applicants.”

“I don't care,” Castiel said. “He's the one. Nobody's going to top that.”

His best friend peered at him. “You don't have to go through with this. Go alone.”

If only he could. “Mother's all but moved Dash's place setting next to mine. I need a date, and it's him.”

Ezekiel folded his arms across his chest, the corners of his mouth turned down. “Castiel.”

“This is the best solution,” Castiel said. “If he says no, then we'll look at the rest.”

Dean's resume lay in front of him, the straight into the camera stare of his headshot mesmerizing. “Ava, do you have his background?”

She gave him a file. First page: twenty nine, born in Lawrence, Kansas. One brother was four years younger, the other, a half-brother, was eleven years Dean's junior. Castiel skipped pages to look for red flags. No problems with drugs. A shoplifting arrest at fifteen… Castiel skimmed the police report.

He'd stolen bread and peanut butter.

Castiel's heart flipped over.

Ezekiel adjusted the camera. “Bring the next applicant.”
Castiel fished his phone out of his jacket pocket. “I need to call him.”

“What?”

“He lives in Vancouver,” Castiel explained. “I should meet with him before he leaves town.”

Ezekiel stared at him. “Don't you think you should--”

“No.” Castiel found Dean's number on his resume and dialed.

Zeke rolled his eyes. “Or you could just phone him up now.”

Castiel held his hand up for silence. “Hello, Dean. This is Castiel Novak.”

The call was brief, but Castiel had to shake off a trickle of guilt at the joyful smile in Dean's voice. Dean Winchester was the one.

He scooped up Dean's file and headed for the door.

Ezekiel spoke as his hand touched the doorknob. “This won’t turn out the way you expect, Castiel.”

Castiel didn't answer him. “Ava, can you print a copy of the contract and bring it to my office?”

The door swung shut on her answer.

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Kevin's maroon Ford Focus sat next to the curb where Dean had left it, a yellow ticket fluttering from under the driver's side wiper.

“Sonofabitch.” He'd only had four American quarters. Had it been longer than twenty-four minutes? Nausea rolled through him as he added fifty dollars to today's price tag.

His phone rang.

He had it in his hand in a moment. The caller had a Seattle area code. He was on international roaming, the charges were ridiculous. If it was a wrong number--

“Dean Winchester.”

“Hello, Dean.” He knew that deep, rough-edged voice. “This is Castiel Novak. Can you come back to the office? I'd like to talk to you about a contract.”

Clouds parted and the sun shone on him. A contract. A contract. “Yes. I'll be right there, I just have to get change for the meter.”

He tugged the yellow paper from the wiper, and it was a handbill advertising an Industry Night party at a local nightclub. Dean whooped. He made change and ran back to the Novak building, stomach swooping like he was on a roller coaster.

He'd quit Hy's properly, if he had time. He could buy a new mattress for his bed. He could buy Sam and Jess something nicer than a waffle iron for their wedding. He checked back in at the desk and rode the same elevator upward. Excitement put him on his toes, trembling with the urge to dance.
Ava waited for him next to the bouquet of lilies. He smiled. “Ava, thank you so much for reading for me.”

“It was a pleasure.” She balanced her tablet in the crook of one arm and shook his hand again. “Mr. Novak is waiting for you in his office.”

She led the way through a maze of corridors to a huge, glass-walled office, westward windows full of a view of Elliott Bay. Dense, deep gray carpet and bamboo walls made the office a dim, comfortable den. Castiel relaxed on a plum leather sofa, a heavy-bottomed glass of whiskey by his knee. Everything screamed money, from the perfect fit of his monogrammed shirt to the heavy Swiss watch on his wrist.

He stood up to shake Dean's hand, his grip firm. “Dean.” The smile he flashed was bright. The lines around his eyes crinkled.

Dean's hand tingled. “Mr. Novak.”

“Please call me Castiel.”

Dean allowed himself a half second to take in the blueness of Castiel's eyes before he retreated to a polite and attentive look. He had to keep this professional. “Castiel. Thank you for calling me back.”

Castiel's smile faltered for an instant. “First I want to apologize, Dean. I called you here for a job, but it's not quite what you may expect.”

The joyful shivers Dean had been holding down stilled. “I'm sorry?”

Castiel gestured to the decanter. “Do you drink scotch?”

Dean flashed an apologetic smile. “I do, but I have to drive back to Vancouver.”

Castiel nodded. “I need an actor for something extraordinary. As such, here is your compensation package.”

Castiel slid a document to Dean. Dean picked it up and blinked. A hundred thousand dollars, plus an expense account for travel, accommodation, wardrobe--

This couldn't be happening. Dean looked for a production name. Was it a feature? He scanned page after page, long past the point where a show should have been named. He skipped down the page and halted at a breath-stealing phrase: “The party of the second part will demonstrate a reasonable level of public affection.”

What?

Dean set it down, his throat tight. “What is this?”

“Not what you think.” Castiel picked up his drink. “If you refuse, it won't reflect on your career. I need your help.”

“I signed an NDA for the audition,” Dean said. “It applies to this conversation too?”

“Indeed.”

Dean watched Castiel carefully. “Can I talk to my lawyer?”
“I encourage you to seek counsel.” He sipped the amber liquid, his long throat bobbing as he swallowed. “May I tell you what I need?”

Dean sat back. “I'm listening.”

Castiel rolled the glass in his palms. “Both of my brothers and my best friend are getting married in the next eight weeks. I require a companion to attend their weddings with me, and various social engagements between them.”

“You want a plus one?” Dean wished he'd accepted that whiskey. “But you could—Mr. Novak--”

“Castiel, please.”

“Castiel, you could have your pick. Tons of guys would want to go out with you.”

He smiled wider. “Thank you. I think this is the best solution.”

“Why?” Dean shook his head. “I apologize. I shouldn't have asked.”

Castiel tilted his head. “You may ask me questions.”

“Okay, let's start with that one.”

Castiel stretched one arm along the back of the couch. “It's simple. I don't want any romantic expectations. Once this plague of weddings is over, I'm going right back to my work.”

Dean didn't let his consternation show. “So, hire an actor. Not to sound stalkerish, but I know you usually go to big media events with your sister.” Anna Novak and her long red hair regularly featured in red carpet photos, often listed among the best dressed.

Castiel nodded. “My family is exerting pressure on me to date, despite my own wishes. I'm appeasing them while avoiding the idea that my invitations have true romantic potential.”

Ah. “They're trying to fix you up with a nice boy?”

Castiel smirked. “You have the essence of it.”

“So. Go to weddings with you.”

“And other social events, for the sake of public appearances.”

Being Castiel Novak's fake boyfriend for two months was a gold mine in networking potential. The money was more than he made in three years of waiting tables and bit part acting calls. Plus an expense account?

There had to be a catch.

“Oh, Castiel. How much of the boyfriend experience are you trying to contract, here? Sorry, but I want to know.”

“You have a right to know.” Castiel set down his empty glass. “I don't expect you to have sex with me.”

Dean's held breath slowly released. He wondered if he would have done it. He glanced at the contract again with a little disquiet. Would he?
Would he?

Castiel spoke into the silence. “In fact, whenever we're in private, the charade is off.”

Dean cocked his head. “So we, what. Just hang out?”

Castiel sat back again. “In matters of physicality, I'm looking for the appearance of an affectionate, monogamous relationship, newly begun and amicably ended in the middle of June. If you can stand to kiss me where other people might see, that's as far as I'll want you to go.”

Affectionate, monogamous relationship. Shit. Linus.

Dean had forgotten about Linus, which said it all. He hadn't introduced Linus to anyone. They'd gone for coffee and a couple of dates, and Linus could be a real good kisser if he'd take a little advice, but--

But nothing. There was a hundred grand sitting on the table. He'd have time for another hot fireman later. The middle of June, though? Dean pursed his mouth. A hundred grand wasn't worth--

“Is there a problem?”

Dean snapped back to attention. “Sorry. I have a conflict with your end date.”

Castiel smiled. “Perhaps we can work something out. What's the conflict?”

“My brother is getting married at the end of May.”

Castiel's shoulders sank, relaxed. “The last wedding is in the middle of May. I wanted to end the contract in June for some fizzle-off time. If you don't want me to attend your brother's wedding, I can arrange an out of town business trip.”

It would be too weird having Castiel along. Dean looked at the contract again. “This isn't what I imagined doing when I set out to have an acting career.”

“For what it's worth, I think you're a talented actor. I'm casting a new television series, producing in Vancouver.”

“You don't need to do that,” Dean shifted, pressing his hands together. “I mean thanks, but you don't have to give me a part because I took on this job.” He'd earn his parts. He wouldn't trade favors. “Actually, do you expect me to stop working while you need me for this plus one stuff?”

Castiel blinked. “You want to continue working your day job?”

Dean chuckled. “I meant if I got a call for an acting job. If it didn't interfere with your important dates.”

“It wouldn't be wise to turn down a call if you didn't have to. I'm busy during the week, so you'd have time.”

The job was more money than Dean had ever seen in his life. This could open a lot of doors, for the cost of a few public kisses. Pecks on Castiel's high cheekbones. Kisses on his mouth. Maybe getting caught in a quiet corner with kissing that got more serious. No, he wouldn't mind kissing Castiel Novak. Not at all.

*That's enough. Eyes on the ball, Winchester.* “Can I take that to my lawyer and get back to you?”
“How long do you think you'll need?’”

Dean licked his lips. Sam needed to see this now. That meant staying in Seattle until he was home from work. That meant kissing his job at Hy's goodbye, and if Sam said no...

He glanced at Castiel, who lifted his stare from Dean's mouth to his eyes. His lips tingled as if he'd just been kissed. Did he imagine it?

Castiel swallowed. “If there’s something you want to negotiate, I’m open to that.”

Did he just--

No, he couldn’t have. Dean held onto his breathing rhythm, closed his parted lips, but the tension up his belly wouldn’t be dismissed. Only kissing, he said. Nothing more.

Fuck it. High churn was part of the restaurant business. He could find another job, if push came to shove. He picked up the pile of papers. “I'll probably know by tonight.”

“Great. Call me.” Castiel handed him a card. “That's my personal number. Anytime before eleven.”

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Dean had worn a cologne that smelled of citrus and peppery spice with a hint of darkened wood. Castiel kept his nose in his whiskey to keep from testing the air. When they settled the contract and went on a date, he'd have an excuse to come close enough and guess all the notes mixed on Dean's skin.

Castiel grimaced and picked up the decanter. He shouldn’t be thinking of Dean's cologne or burying his nose in the man's neck. Shouldn't even do it while they posed as newly entangled in a relationship.

And they would. Dean's expression went from suspicion to relief as he learned what the job really was—and then wasn't. His glances at the sum Castiel offered kept him hooked long enough to be convinced before he took the deal to his lawyer. It was too good to resist, the opportunity for an actor on the cusp of his thirties just too ripe.

Castiel tried to banish an image of Dean with his mouth fallen open and his eyelids lowered, full of anticipation as he leaned closer to Castiel, the soft meeting of their lips—it haunted him, and Castiel Novak was not haunted by fantasies of beautiful men. He didn't dream of men who had faces and names.

Dean was exactly what Castiel wanted. He would launch Dean's career after the weddings were done. He could take his pick: New York, Hollywood, even Toronto. Castiel put his nose inside his glass, letting peat, smoke, and salt water cloud the lingering scent of Dean and--

He moved the glass away and breathed again. Bergamot, that was it.

“Damn it.”

Dean was too much. He was going to pay for it with a hero's measure of stoic endurance. Dean was going to say yes, and Castiel wouldn't renege on the offer.

His phone vibrated and he answered it before the ringtone registered. “Hello.”

“Castiel, you should have come with us.” Michael had called, jovial and wheedling as only his
The skiing is a disaster. It's too warm down in the village, and all your bunny hills are a shambles."

Castiel smiled and leaned back. "If the skiing is no good, why should I have come?"

"Because you ought to be suffering along with us."

"I've still got some work to do."

His brothers leaving gave him a narrow window to audition potential candidates. He'd claimed the auditions were for the pilot of *Grosvenor Lane*, and Ezekiel had gone along with the conspiracy in spite of his opinion of Castiel's plan. He planned to use these two days to establish the blossoming of his new relationship. If Dean didn't say yes...

No. Dean couldn't pass up that much money. Castiel had his background. He knew.

Wind sounded on Michael's end of the line. "Are you coming up on Friday?"

"Saturday."

It was time to start the show. "I have a date."

Michael yelped. "You have a date? Who?"

"No one you know."

"Wait, Castiel has a date?"

His other brother Lucas asked, his voice muffled by distance. "Put us on speaker."

"Hi, Lucas."

"Castiel, a real date? Finally! Will you toss him in the deep end?"

"Castiel wouldn't do that," Michael scoffed. "He's going with Dash."

This was it. "I don't want to go with Dash, Michael."

Michael sighed. "Don't be difficult, Castiel. Please."

Castiel made a face. Dashiell LaCroix and Michael had been friends for years, and Michael believed that since he liked Dash, then Castiel should adore him. Michael also liked Dash's family, who were swimming in oil. A perfect match for his youngest brother, as far as Michael was concerned.

"I do like Dash," Castiel said. "But I don't like Dash that way."

He didn't like anyone that way.

The hiss of an opening soda bottle sounded nearby. "How many dates have you been on with this new guy, Castiel?" Lucas interrupted. "How long have you been holding out on us?"

"Friday will be the first."

Michael gave a relieved sigh. "So you're not bringing him to the wedding."

Only a mouthful of whiskey remained in his glass. It wasn't that Michael drove him to drink. Castiel just wished he'd poured more than a finger's worth. "Actually, I was planning on inviting him."

"Castiel, we've worked our fingers to the bone planning this wedding. If your date is an
embarrassment, Hael will never forgive you.”

Lucas made a rude noise in the background. “Lighten up, Michael.”

“Dash would make a fine date,” Michael protested. “He and Castiel suit each other.”

Castiel gritted his teeth. “The fact that Dash likes boys isn't enough reason to think he's suitable.”

“Fine,” Michael sighed. “Be difficult. Why don't you bring Tracy Bell? It's good publicity for her going into Grosvenor Lane.”

“Why don't you bring Ava?” Lucas asked. “Ava carries herself well, and she knows her place.”

It was a bit vicious, but Michael didn't take hints well. Castiel shoved his voice into Michael and Lucas’s bickering. “Neither of them are real romantic prospects, that's why.”

“You're right, you have to bring a man,” Lucas said. “Why can't you be bisexual?”

Castiel grinned and filled his glass with water. “To make your life difficult.”

They laughed until Michael interrupted. “What does this date of yours do, Castiel?”

He knew the question was coming. He also knew how Michael would take it. “He's an actor.”

“Castiel. An actor? Really?”

“But I can bring Tracy Bell to your wedding?”


“That's ridiculous.” Castiel got off the couch and crossed the room, resting his head on the cool glass. 4th Avenue lay far below, the cars and people so small.

“You haven't been on a date in years.” Michael had gotten louder, his voice strained. “And you're jumping back into the pool with an actor? Bringing him to my wedding?”

“Shut up, Michael,” Lucas said. “Castiel, how does he make you feel?”

Dean? Dean didn't make him feel anything. He was the right man for the job—talented, sexy, warm, caring... “I don't know.”

“Castiel,” Lucas's voice was gentle, but he wasn't letting his younger brother wiggle off that hook. “This isn't rocket science. Does he make your dick hard, or does he make your heart leap?”

Castiel didn't miss a beat. “Both.”

Silence from their end of the line. If they'd been in the room he'd watch his brothers exchange glances as what he said sank in.

“I want to meet him,” Lucas said. “He must be something else. See you Saturday.”

“Saturday,” Castiel agreed, and hung up.

Why had he said both? He hadn't hesitated, hadn't engaged the filter between brain and mouth. It was the answer that shut his brothers up. Maybe he'd known it would.

He tapped his phone again.
“Castiel.”

“Ava. Can you book me into a room in downtown Vancouver for Friday night? And I need reservations for dinner, close to the hotel.”

Dinner was a fine date. It was traditional. He didn't have much time to get to know Dean before he needed him to be his boyfriend.
Clocks

Bolognese sauce simmered on the stove in Sam's small, freshly cleaned apartment. Dean folded Sam's table open and laid the contract next to Sam's array of post-it notes, differently colored pens, and a spare legal pad. Rush hour traffic noise had slowed, but snatches of conversation and shouting wafted through the open, unscreened windows. The sun-rayed chrome clock over the sink struck eight with a mechanical click. Sam would be home soon.

Dean should be through two table rotations by now. Andy probably had to take his section, leaving the host job to the manager, who would leave his work undone to make up for Dean missing his shift. The dinner shift on Wednesdays wasn’t too bad. It wasn’t like he skipped out on a Friday night. He tried to tell himself that, but it wasn’t working.

Dean checked the sauce and went back to Google stalking Castiel Novak. Most of what Dean found was pictures of him at awards events and charity fundraisers with his sister, Anna. He didn’t give interviews, and articles about him focused on his tantalizing mysteriousness.

He never dated. And celebrity news didn’t know why.

The floor outside Sam's door creaked.

“Dean?”

Sam closed the door and let something fall to the ground with a heavy thud. Sam's bicycle tick-tick-ticked as he pushed it to its parking space in the corner.

Dean minimized his browser window. “How did you know it was me?”

“Jess is doing an overnight.” A light switch clacked. “Did you clean the bathroom?”

“Did I ruin your science experiment?”

“Shut up.” Sam appeared from around the corner, still wearing his bicycle helmet and fingerless riding gloves. He took a long sniff of the air. “You made your special pasta sauce. What did you do to my living room?”

“It's an ancient tradition from Kansas.” Dean shut the fridge door with his foot and set a growler of beer on the table. “It's called dusting.”

Sam gave him the finger and disappeared inside his tiny partitioned bedroom. “Did you wash my laundry? Dude, you cleaned my entire apartment.”

“I need my lawyer.” Dean gestured to the contract on the tabletop. “I'm under an NDA for this.”

“You got the part, this fast? Wow.” Sam tossed his helmet and gloves onto the couch. “What's the part?”

Dean swallowed. “You better read the contract.”

Sam settled on the other end of the table. He tapped a red pen on the legal pad, flipping to the next page faster than Dean figured anyone could read legalese. Sam's frown of concentration deepened into suspicion as he turned the pages. “Dean, what the fuck is this.”

Dean shifted in his seat. “What does it say it is?”
“That you're agreeing to appear in public beside Castiel Novak for social events and not telling anybody it's a business deal.”

Dean tilted Sam's glass and poured him a beer. “Sounds about right.”

Sam tapped his pen faster, jaw slung stubbornly forward. “It reads like a prenup, in places. And you have to break up with your fireman. Says right here you have to look like you're monogamous.”

“Yeah, that's a bit cold, but--” The stove timer buzzed, and Dean got up to put the water on. “It's only been a couple of dates.”

“I thought you liked him. You wouldn't shut up about him when you met.”

That was an exaggeration. “He rescued a kitten out of a tree, Sam. Ladder truck and everything. That picture I took blew up my Instagram for days.”

Sam shrugged and drank some beer. “What if Linus is the love of your life?”

Dean was never going to have one of those. “He crushes my mouth when we kiss.”

“Oh. Well forget it, then.” Sam turned a page of the contract. “What have you dug up on this guy? Past boyfriends? Girlfriends?”

“Nothing. He goes to events with his sister.” Dean tasted the sauce, and had a little more. “I can't find anything about him before NetWatch took off.”

“Okay.” Sam set down his pen in favor of his beer. “Why does he want a pretend boyfriend?”

“I can guess.” Sam's knife and cutting board landed in the sink where Dean ran water over them. “When was the last time you had to scramble for a plus one?”

Sam shrugged. “High school. Aunt Ellen and Uncle Bobby's wedding.”

“That totally doesn't count.”

“I always go with Jess.”

“That's my point. You've been with Jess for years. You know all the questions about when you and Jess were getting married?”

Sam nodded, laughing softly. “Every time.”

Dean reached for his beer and stirred the spaghetti. “It's worse when you're single.”

“Were you sweating about our wedding?”

“A single best man? Might as well paint a target on my chest.” The spaghetti was just a tiny bit chewy. He took down plates and fetched forks from the silverware drawer.

Sam set the partly read contract aside. “So he wants you to pretend you're in a relationship so he doesn't have to answer difficult questions at the reception?”

“His family is trying to fix him up with somebody. He doesn't want a real relationship.”

Sam made a face. “Why the hell not?”
Dean dumped the pasta in a colander, shaking it. He'd made too much, as usual. “He's too busy.”

“Oh, bullshit.” Sam said. “I'm an associate at a law firm. Jess is going into residency. Don't talk to me about busy. There's something fucked up about this.”

“Of course there's something fucked up about it, Sam.” Spaghetti landed on the plates, rich meat sauce poured on top. “It's a hundred grand plus expenses. To pretend to be together? That's just weird.”

Sam eyed him. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Dean shrugged and looked away. “It's a lot of money. And he said no sex.”

Sam watched him for a few long seconds. “Do you believe that?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“I have a couple of amendments. Can you email the contract to me?”

“Yeah.”

“I'll write them tomorrow. Are you going home tonight?”

“No need.” Dean picked up the full plates and laid them on the table. “I'm probably already fired by now.”

***

Castiel stood in the middle of his empty living room and watched the bright face of Venus shining in the last glow of twilight. He glanced at his phone for the three hundredth time that evening, waiting for Dean to call.

The latest American Art Collector had arrived and he'd dropped it straight into the garbage. He couldn't concentrate on his novel, but he reread Dean's resume and background check three times. The clock ticked past ten while his phone stayed silent and dark. There was no point in going upstairs to flip channels. He could go up on the roof and look for stars. Anything but stand here and wait.

He felt like a fool. Maybe Dean wouldn't call. Maybe he'd turn down the money. He was ready to blow an audition for the sake of a stranger earlier today, and Castiel didn't understand that kind of altruism. Dean made him wish he did.

No. Castiel turned in a circle, inspecting the bare, unfurnished room. He remembered why it was empty. Remembered why he couldn't get too curious about Dean Winchester. He didn't get involved.

But Dean could at least call and tell Castiel no. “Damn you, ring.”

The phone rang. Dean's headshot flashed up on the screen. Castiel slid his thumb across Dean's lips and pressed the phone to his ear. “Hello.”

“Hi. This is Dean Winchester.”

Castiel tried to ignore the flutter in his stomach. “Hi. Did you speak with your lawyer?”

Traffic sounds rumbled in the background, as if Dean were out in the street. “Yeah. We discussed it
over dinner.”

He’d gone to his brother Sam. “And what did he advise?”

“Well, assuming I accept, he has a couple of things he'd like to add about confidentiality, some stuff about media appearances.”

“Assuming you accept? Does that mean you don't want to?”

“Well…” Dean cleared his throat. “Sorry. He didn't like the idea.”

“What do you think?”

A siren wailed on Dean's end, and he waited for it to pass before speaking. “I think it's a huge pile of money to go out with an attractive man for a couple of months. That's why the big fee, isn't it? It's go away money.”

Dean's observation struck Castiel like a bell. “I didn't think of it that way, but yes.”

“My—lawyer, he thinks it's… you know. Like paying an escort.”

That wasn't it. That wasn't it at all. “The contract is specific.”

Dean's breath burst in a brief chuckle. “You ever hear that escorts are getting paid for the companionship, but the agency can't control what two consenting adults decide to do?”

Castiel gripped the phone. “Dean. I promise you. I have zero expectation of anything beyond what's in the contract.” It didn't matter how attractive he was, or how intriguing he smelled, or—or anything.


Castiel laughed. Relief relaxed his ribcage. “He wouldn't be good if he didn't go to bat for you.” A cuckoo called, and car engines sounded through the phone. “Are you outside?”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “I didn't want Sam listening to half the conversation. I went for a walk.”

“Sam?”

“My brother,” Dean answered. “Also my lawyer.”

“Is that the brother who's getting married?”

“Yeah. I have another brother—well he's my half-brother. He lives in Minnesota.” Laughter sounded through Dean's speaker, a snatch of music that faded as Dean kept walking. “You don't want to know all this.”

“I do,” Castiel said. He wanted to know all the things he couldn't learn from the background check. Like how Dean wound up in Drama club, and how he discovered he liked guys.

“Yeah, I guess you need to. For the contract, I mean.”

There. Castiel's curiosity had a reason. They'd talk about these things, if it were real. “Are you close to your half-brother?”

“It's not like me and Sam. What about you? Are you close to your brothers?”
“Between you and me?”

“Sure.”

“These weddings need to be over before I sew them into sacks and drop them in the bay.”

Dean chuckled. “So you love them.”

Castiel smiled in the darkness. “I do. You're the oldest, right?”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “Sam's twenty-five, Adam's eighteen, and they're both getting married before me.”

“Is that pessimistic?”

Dean laughed. “Adam's been with the same girl since high school. It's good odds they're next.”

And Dean had never married. Castiel wondered if he'd ever come close. “It's getting late. Will you go to dinner with me on Friday night?”

Dean hesitated. “In Seattle?”

“In Vancouver. I'll be on my way up to Whistler for the weekend. I thought we could get to know each other.”

“Makes sense. I can make it,” Dean said. “Do you wanna meet downtown?”

“Ava's booking a hotel for me. I assume it will be.”

“All right. I should get off the phone, my bill's gonna be murder. Send me a text when you know where we'll meet?”

“I will. I look forward to seeing you on Friday.”

“Me too,” Dean said. “Good-night, Mr. Novak.”

“Castiel.”

“Castiel,” Dean's voice was soft, as if his lips brushed Castiel's ear. “Good-night.”

Castiel held his warm phone in his hand. They hadn't talked enough. Castiel hadn't learned half the things he wanted to know, but he relaxed on one account: Dean wanted to say yes.

Castiel would agree to whatever Dean's brother wanted to change. Nobody else would do. Dean was perfect.

***

Dean woke up with upholstery-waffled skin and a sore neck at six a.m., startling awake to music blasting on the radio. It cut off as Sam slapped the alarm. The floorboards creaked under Sam's bare feet as he zombie-walked to the bathroom.

Dean laid a worn, flattened pillow over his eyes, shielding them from the sunrise. “Your apartment is a noisy shoebox.”

“You live in a house with three grown-ass men.” Sam retreated to the shower. Dean made coffee
and poured a bowl of cereal. Some idiot on a bicycle was ringing his bell out there—no, wait. That was his phone's text message alert.

*Please call me when you get this message.*

Castiel.

Dean ran his fingers through his hair. Was it sticking up? It didn't matter. It was a phone call, Castiel wouldn't be able to see him. Dean grimaced at himself. It's a job. Not a real date. He swallowed a mouthful of granola and got on the phone.

Castiel answered on the first ring. “Hello, Dean. You're an early riser.”

“I can get up early in the morning,” Dean said. “I just don't like it. You wake up early.”

“Jogging and yoga. I alternate days.”

Dean smiled. “I run when somebody's chasing me, and that's it. What's up?”

“If you'll stop by the office, I have a check ready for your travel expenses.”

Dean swallowed a gulp of coffee. “But I haven't signed the contract.”

“It's the least I can do,” Castiel said.

He could pay Aaron back. “You didn't need to write me a check.”

“Perhaps not. But I thought you should know. The first wedding is next Friday night.”

Eight days. This was really happening. “I'll need to rent a tux.”

“Buy one,” Castiel said. “Ava will make an appointment for you to get a fitting when you get your charge card. Will Sam have the contract changes finished today?”

“He said he would.”

“Excellent. I have to go, I have a breakfast meeting.”

“Ohkay,” Dean said. “I have soggy granola. Have a good day, Castiel.”

He set the phone down and the floorboards creaked.

“You want some coffee, Sam?”

“Was that your employer?” Sam's cheeks were pink with a fresh shave, and he had that look on his face again.

“Yeah. He cut me a check for travel expenses.”

Sam's eyes narrowed. “Generous.” The bottom of his coffee mug tilted up as he drank the whole cup in one go.

“He said he's getting me a charge card for when I sign the contract.”

“Which you won't do until I like the terms.” Sam set his cup next to the sink and headed to the bedroom, leaving the sliding door partway open.
“Sammy,” Dean pitched his voice to carry. “You don't like the terms.”

“I'm negotiating a companion contract for my brother.”

Dean sighed. “Sam, maybe you can walk away from a hundred grand, but I'm not you.”

Sam came back, buttoning a pale blue shirt. “I know. That's why it bothers me. It's a lot of money.”

“I could go back to school,” Dean said. “It's time I thought about that.”

“What about acting?”

“I said I'd push the button if I wasn’t getting anywhere by thirty,” Dean said. “Something crazy would have to happen between now and January.”

Sam pointed at the contract. “You’re telling me that’s not crazy?”

“Maybe it is,” Dean shrugged. “But it’s not me on the screen, is it?”

Sam's phone rang. Aunt Ellen's picture popped up on the screen. Sam answered and put it on speaker. “Hey, Aunt Ellen.”

“Morning, Aunt Ellen.”

“Dean, is that you, honey? What are you doing in Seattle?”

Dean spoke around a mouthful of soggy granola. “I came down for an audition.”

Sam gave him a wide-eyed look, and cut his finger across his throat.

“In Seattle? How did you do?”

“I was late, I don't think I'll get it.”


Sam retrieved his coffee cup from the counter. “How's Uncle Bobby?”

Ellen sighed. “That's why I called you, Sam. The bank will only mortgage the property for fifteen thousand.”

Oh, no. “Why so little?” Dean asked.

“Assessed value, sheer evil, we don't know.” Sizzling rose from Ellen's end of the phone. Dean could almost smell the deer sausage she made for breakfast. “He could work if he got the surgery, but we're still short what insurance won't pay.”

Sam screwed up his face. “Will five thousand help? It's what I have to spare.”

“You need that for your nursery,” Ellen scolded.

“We're not going to have kids right away, Aunt Ellen. Jess wants to get through residency.”

“I can help,” Dean said.

Silence for a beat, then two. “Oh no, Dean honey, you need to save your money,” Ellen said. “I know how expensive Canada is.”
Sam clenched his jaw and tried to stare Dean down. This was more important than a course in restaurant management. Uncle Bobby had been the father Dad couldn't be.

“I can help,” Dean insisted.

Sam looked skyward, and nodded. “Dean and I will help.”

“You boys...” Ellen muffled the receiver with her hand.

“I think your breakfast is ready, Aunt Ellen. We'll talk to you later.”

Ellen said a watery goodbye. Sam pinched his lips together.

“No going back now,” Dean said.

Sam still didn't look happy. “Journal everything you buy with the expense account. Record why you bought what you bought, photocopy the pages, and hand that in with the receipts.”

“Okay.” Dean set the bowl in the sink. “Is there any hot water?”

“Should be lots,” Sam said. “What are you going to tell Linus?”

Dean shrugged. “I've got three hours to figure it out.”

***

Mother was in his chair when Castiel came back from his breakfast meeting with Legal. She looked over the scripts he had set aside to read more closely, reading glasses slid halfway down her nose. She lit up with a glad smile when Castiel came in, crossing the room to meet him.

“My dear, what is this I hear about you bringing an actor to Michael's wedding?”

Castiel gave his mother a big smile. “Good morning, Mother. Our liability insurance is renegotiated, and we're saving quite a bit of money on the deal.”

He kissed her cheek and Naomi Novak slid gentle arms around him. “An out-of-work actor, Castiel?”

“Undiscovered,” Castiel corrected.

She stepped back and gave him a concerned look. “Maybe you should wait, dear. Michael is very concerned. None of us have had a chance to meet him.”

“You'll get to meet him.” Castiel guided her to sit on the couch. “At Michael's wedding.”

“But Dash is coming alone too,” Mother said. “It fits so nicely.”

Dash was... nice. Good looking, certainly, but just nice. Michael and Mother kept trying to push them together. New Year's Eve had been so embarrassing that Castiel still cringed when he thought of it. “Other guests are bringing strangers to the wedding. It'll be fine.”

“Are you determined to have him?” The twinkle in her eyes was for her own insinuation.

“Mother.”

She poked him in the shoulder. “You're not getting any younger, love. You need to settle down and

She smiled, undaunted. “Is this actor of yours handsome?”

“Very.”

She cocked her head. “And there are no...problems?”

“Single, never married, no criminal history, no drugs.”

She picked up Castiel's tablet and activated it. “Name.”

“Mother.”

“His name, child.”

Castiel huffed. “Dean Winchester.”

She tapped and swiped and turned the tablet around to show Castiel Dean's headshot. Castiel nodded.

“He's beautiful.” She scrolled to his credits. “And he's nobody.”

“Mother, Michael's enough of a snob for the whole family, don't you agree?”

Mother's eyes narrowed. “Why him?”

“You've got his picture right in front of you.”

“That's not enough reason and you know it.”

If it was, he'd be content with Dash. “I like him. He's kind. He's good with kids.”

Mother smirked. “You don't want kids. However did you meet?”

Castiel tried not to squirm under Mother's interrogating stare. “He auditioned yesterday.”

“He must have made quite an impression.”

“He—yes. I don't know a lot about him.”

“But you want to,” Mother said. “Is he a good actor?”

“Yes. He gets miscast as eye candy.”

“He is eye candy, Castiel. Look at him.”

“But he's good,” Castiel said. “Subtle and reactive. Strong improvisational skills. I think he could do great things.”

She glanced at Dean's headshot again. “Do you want to advance his career or do you want to be in love, Castiel? I think you should decide.”
Castiel dragged his hands through his hair. “Is it okay with you if I take him out to dinner first?”

Mother set down the tablet. “I don't want you to pull some random man out of a hat just to make
me happy. I want you to be happy.”

Castiel wouldn’t bring up Mother sitting Dash next to him every chance she got. “I am happy,
Mother.”

“But you need somebody, dear. It's been too long.”

No, it wasn’t. It just doesn’t happen twice. Why couldn't anyone accept that? “Mother.”

“Even if Dean Winchester isn't the one, stretch your wings a little, would you? Your own mother
gets more action than you do.”

Castiel clapped his hands over his ears. “I'm not listening, la la la. And I'm telling Dad.”

Mother smiled. “I hope he's not a disaster, Castiel. I want to meet him. It says here that he's a
dancer.”

“Yes.” Dean could dance. He could stage fight, ride horses, ski, skateboard, golf, play pool, and
knit. “So you won't object to me bringing him to the wedding?”

“Since you're so determined. I trust you, Castiel. You make good choices.”

Usually. He offered his hand, palm up. “I should work.”

She stood up, smoothing her skirt. “I sent you a link to this wonderful room I found on the Internet.
Did you look?”

Castiel had clicked away as soon as he saw the room's exposed brick wall and big wooden framed
windows. “I saw it.”

“Well? What do you think?”

Castiel bent to retrieve his tablet. “The style's not really me.”

“You should think about hiring a decorator, dear. And changing that awful green on the window
frames.”

Mother had been in his home to pick him up for New Year's. He had opened the door to her and
raced back upstairs to find a missing cufflink, and when he returned she stood in the middle of his
empty room, her bone-white leather gloves clutched in one fist. She hadn't said anything, but she
subscribed him to Sunset, Architectural Digest, and American Art Collector. He never told her
what he did with them when they arrived in the mail.

“It's a good suggestion, Mother. Thank you. I'll consider it.”

Her smile was tinged with sadness. “I hope this new man is wonderful.”

Castiel ignored the pang of guilt. He wouldn't be around long enough for Mother to get attached,
but Castiel hoped she liked him. “You'll have to tell me what you think after you meet him.”

“I've kept my Vichy bath waiting long enough. I hope your date goes well, Castiel.” She kissed his
cheek.
“I’m sure it will, Mother.” All Dean needed was reasonable manners and a little personality to go with his improvisational talent.

Nothing further was required.
Stone

Dean was a wretch. He was a mercenary. He was a jerk.

“I thought we had something,” Linus said to the cobblestone driveway in front of the firehall. “Stupid, right?”

Dean had winced at the glowing smile on Linus' face when he walked out to meet him. He looked great today, broad shoulders stretching a red t-shirt with a gold logo for his brotherhood, his shining blond hair teased up into the rockabilly-style pompadour he tended with careful hands. He'd swaggered up to Dean and leaned in for a kiss, and Dean had swerved it so Linus's lips landed on his cheek. After three and a half hours on the road all Dean could say was, “It's not going to work out, I'm sorry.”

Dean was an asshole.

Linus's shoulders slumped. He stuck his hands in his pockets and looked at Dean. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” Dean wanted to stroke his shoulder, offer comfort. He kept his hands to himself. “You're great. You're hot, and you're sweet, you jive like a demon and you're a goddamn fireman. Guys would crawl across broken glass to have you.”

“But not you.”

Dean was a greedy, heartless dick. “I can't go out with you anymore, Linus.”

Linus turned his face down to the cobblestones. “Is there someone else?”

The question made Dean hang his head.


Dean closed his eyes. “Linus, I'm sorry.”

“You didn't sleep with him,” Linus said. “You're not like that. He must be something special. Or else he's your fatal flaw.”

Dean looked up. “What?”

Linus shrugged. “Two types make you stop in your tracks that fast. One's real good, and the other's real bad. Both of 'em get under your skin, make you feel like they're haunting you when they're not around, making you half-crazy...”

That wasn't how Dean made him feel, was it? “Linus--”

Linus raised his finger, and Dean hushed. “When it happens to you, you can't help it. When he's something special, you don't let go. But sometimes you feel like that, and it winds up hurting you. Awful.”

Dean couldn't speak. Linus reached up and touched Dean's cheek, light fingers drifting down his face. “If he's the wrong kind, you come and tell me, Dean. I'll listen.”

Dean shut his eyes and stood still. It wasn’t fair. Linus deserved a better guy than Dean. He
deserved somebody who could love him.

“Linus,” Dean said. “I mean it. Whoever wins you, they're lucky.”

He went home as the first raindrops splashed on the windshield. It was pouring by the time he parked in the driveway of his house, rain pattering off his leather jacket. He dashed up the stairs, scooping flyers out of the mailbox before going inside.

“Dean?”

“Chuck. You're still up?”

Chuck sat at the long dining room table with his laptop, a carton of grapefruit juice, and a half-full bottle of Gordon's Gin beside him. The screen in front of him cast an empty white glow over his bearded face, a blank page reflected in his eyes. “I hate this scene. This scene hates me.”

“What's supposed to happen?” Dean asked.

“They're supposed to realize that they were wrong about it being a werewolf,” Chuck said. “Never mind that. What happened? Did you get the part?”

It was time to start the role. “I didn't get the part.”

Sympathy on Chuck's face was up-tilted eyebrows and a sideways shift to his jaw. “That sucks. And now you've gotta haul ass to make your lunch shift--”

“I was a no-show for dinner last night.”

“What?” Chuck dropped his forehead into the prop of his hands. “Dean, why, man? I know you don't take your wait jobs seriously, but do you have rent?”

Dean had a check for a thousand dollars in his pocket. “I got it. I stayed in Seattle because something crazy happened.”


“Yeah.” Dean smiled and held out his arm. “Pinch me.”

Chuck leaned across the table. Dean jerked his arm back. “Ow!”

“You asked.” Chuck's chair rocked with the force of his slouch back into his seat. He reached for his glassful of pink juice, the rim crusted with sugar. “Why did I do that?”

“Castiel Novak is taking me out for dinner tomorrow night.”

Chuck choked. “What?”

“We're going on a date.”

The glass came down on Chuck's notebook, smearing the ink underneath. “Dean. Are you shitting me? Is this a walk of shame? Is that why you're a day late with Kevin's car?”

Dean's face got hot. “No, we didn't… I'm not that kind of girl, man. He just asked me out.”

“On a date. Where?”
“For dinner. His assistant is making reservations.” Dean wandered into the kitchen. “Is there any food?”

“It’s your turn to get groceries.”

Dean shut the fridge door. “I don't have enough time, I've gotta go buy a new tie. And new pants.”

“Throw me the cash and I'll do it,” Chuck offered. “I have tonight off and writing’s not happening today. Go get date clothes. Take Kevin’s car.”

Dean waved it off. “I've already had it too long. I'll ride.”

“It's raining too hard to be a motorcycle rebel today, Dean. Take the car. And call your agent!”

Dean opened a cupboard and made a face. It was empty. “Did Crowley call?”

“Three times.”

Dean went to the front closet and fished his phone out of his soggy leather jacket. “Why didn't he call my cell?”

“Because you were roaming, dumbass. You can't afford it.”

“I've got a check coming from that werewolf movie.”

“That non-union werewolf movie?”

Hell. Chuck had remembered that detail. “Don't worry, I got this.”

Crowley picked up on the second ring. “There you are. Finally. That audition in Seattle was a wash, Dean. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay, man.” Should he tell Crowley? He couldn't. No one could know.

“Cheer up, mate. You've got a four day call in ten days. Motive wants you back.”

The timing was perfect, coming just after the first wedding. “Sure, I can do that. Continuity background?”

“Your character's name is Connor. Drop in and get your script.”

Crowley hung up. Dean punched the air. “Yes! Speaking part on Motive!”

“That's awesome,” Chuck said. “Do you think Castiel had a hand in it?”

Dean's stomach sank. What if he hadn't earned it? What if Castiel was already pulling strings? “He's not with CTV.”

“He streams their shows,” Chuck pointed out. “He might have.”

The phone vibrated in Dean’s hand and he answered it. “Crowley?”

“Dad.”

“Oh hey, Dad.”

Chuck gave him a sympathetic look.
“Everybody and their uncle is going out to Seattle at the end of May,” John rattled computer keys. “I’m trying to get flights situated and it’s a nightmare, but I figured it out.”

The garbage was full. Dean hoisted the bag out of the can and took it out back. “Okay. What’s the plan?”

“Kate and Adam come in on the 29th, and I’ll be there in the morning. Were you going to stay on the island that night?”

Dean ducked his head and dashed through the back yard. “I’ll drive out and get you in the morning. I’ll bring Sam and we can--”

“Actually, I was hoping we’d get a chance to spend some time together,” John said.

Dread shivered in Dean’s guts. Rain dribbled down his neck. “You’re planning a father-son talk two months in advance?”

John’s sigh blew through the phone. “We haven’t spent any time together since you came out for Christmas, and you complained about the cold the whole time.”

The garage smelled like grass clippings and dust. Dean pitched his voice to sound over the creak of the garage door. “We were ice fishing with no shed. The left half of my face went numb. And we didn’t catch anything.”

“It won’t kill you to spend an hour or two with your old man, will it? Come on.”

An hour to the ferry, a thirty five minute crossing, and 15 minutes to the Moore’s house. Alone. No Sam to change the subject.

That was gonna be some day. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Okay. I’m buying that flight.” John’s keyboard clacked. “So how are you? Are you still seeing that firefighter?”

“It wasn’t working out.” Dean said.

“Oh.”

Silence stretched thin and tight. Dean braced himself for John’s response.

“Sorry to hear that.”

Dean blinked. “It’s okay.”

“Did you...was it serious?”

“No. Just a few dates. I’m okay, Dad.” Please stop talking. Don’t make me hang up on you.

“Okay. I’ll let you go. Adam’s got a game today.”

“Tell Adam to break a leg. I’ll see you on the 30th.”

Dean hung up. He remembered the perfect fit of Castiel’s clothes and mentally counted his money. He needed a hell of a lot more than a new tie, but after groceries there wasn’t much to play with.

Cas would be the type to pay for the whole date. Dean dodged raindrops to the back door. He had
an outfit to improve.

***

Castiel claimed a wingback chair in the lobby of the Hotel Vancouver fifteen minutes early, alternating between reading fan theory of cult-favorite television and watching the next person to move through the brass and glass revolving door. He'd chosen and discarded six different ties before settling on a smoke gray micro-check. Maybe he was too stark, dressed in black. He had a few minutes to change.

Dean arrived just then, five minutes early. He surveyed the brightly lit lobby, crossing the polished marble floor with long, easy strides. Castiel let himself stare. He'd worn a crisp steel-blue shirt with a silvery windowpane tie and charcoal slacks with knife-sharp creases down the center of the leg. His best clothing, Castiel guessed. He couldn't wait to see Dean in a tuxedo.

Castiel rose from his chair and Dean tracked him, his expression glad. Castiel met him on the marble floor, his hand extended. “Hello, Dean. You look very nice.”

Dean's handshake lingered. “So do you.” He leaned closer and they patted each other's backs. Sandalwood struck high notes in his cologne. It was too soon for Castiel to linger close enough to get another whiff.

“We have reservations nearby,” Castiel said. “I thought we'd walk.”

“Sure.”

A breeze carried the smell of blooming cherry trees, planted in regular patches along the wide sidewalk. Dean fell into step beside Castiel, taking a deep breath.

“It smells good out here.”

So did he. “Ava managed reservations nearby.”

Their knuckles brushed as they walked together. Each contact sent shivers up his arm. Their first date was too soon for Castiel to catch Dean's fingers and walk with hands clasped. Wasn't it?

Dean looked ahead and licked his lips. “Are we...are we going to Hy's?”

Was there something wrong with the place, something only locals knew? “Yes. Is there a problem?”

Dean laughed. He shook his head. “The irony. If you'd picked someone else for the job, I probably would have been your server.”

Oh no. “We can go somewhere else.” He could just imagine what Michael would say if he heard this story. “Anywhere you like.”

“Nah, it's fine. I went in yesterday and took my lumps. They do a mean steak here, and the service is really good. Well. I would have been better.”

What if he had chosen someone else, and then met the guy from Starbucks? It was almost as if they were supposed to meet.

“Funny to think that if I hadn't gone to the audition, we would have met anyway. Just watch, they'll put us in my old section.”
“It won't be uncomfortable?” Castiel asked. “We can go somewhere else.”

Dean reached the door first and held it open. “They're happy I got a good part on Motive. Thank you, by the way.”

Castiel looked back. “Me? What for?”

“Welcome to Hy's,” a new voice said. “May I have the name of your reservation?”

Their host was a young man, and he looked over Castiel's shoulder at Dean before turning his attention back.

“Novak.”

The host's smile faltered. He glanced at his seating chart. “We're still working on a table for you, but you can relax and enjoy a drink in the lounge?”

First they were having dinner in the restaurant that had just fired Dean, and now the table wasn't ready. This was a disaster.

But Dean spoke up. “Andy. How are you? Is it the Andersons?”

Andy nodded. “They're taking longer than expected.”

Dean smirked at Castiel. “I told you we'd get my old section.”

What would that have been like? Castiel, trying hard to be an attentive date, but unable to help the way his gaze wandered around the section as Dean filled glasses and took plates...He gave his head a shake. “Are the Andersons regulars?”

“Every Friday night for twenty-five years,” Dean said with a fond smile. They must have been good customers. “They have three cups of coffee before they get going, so they always stay longer than expected.”

“So the table shouldn't have been booked.”

“I always gave them an extra half hour,” Dean explained. “Do you mind if I handle the order? If we have an appetizer in the lounge and the Chateaubriand for two, it'll work out.”

Castiel blinked. “Let's do that.”

Andy led them to a small stone-topped table with olive green leather chairs. A uniformed parade of men and women worked together to make sure they were comfortable. But Castiel couldn't shake off the wish that they were anywhere, anywhere but here.

Dean tilted his menu and looked at Castiel over the top edge. “Do you like smoked salmon?”

“Yes.”

“I suggest it,” Dean said. “It's local, and it's quick to prepare.”

“Sounds good.” Castiel made the order, requested the Chateaubriand, and then tried to relax.

Dean closed the narrow wine menu. “Can you start us with glasses of the Pinot Noir, and we'll have a bottle of If Six was Nine with the main course, please.”
Castiel nodded his approval. “I’m in your hands tonight.”

“I’ll be gentle,” Dean teased.

Castiel couldn’t just sit here like a lump. Dean was working his ass off to make this date go smoothly. He had to hold up his end. “How long did you work here?” he asked, and wished he could take it back.

“Four months,” Dean said. “I was in the lounge at the Hyatt before that. I’ve worked all over downtown.”

“Did you like it?”

“This was a good place to work.” Dean tasted the pale-pink wine and nodded to the server. “But you work lunch and then you get a couple hours off before the dinner shift. It was hard to get time off for an acting call.”

The smoked salmon arrived, served on toast points. Castiel tried a bite. What he thought was raw onion was actually fennel, tasting of licorice. “You mentioned Motive earlier.”

Dean nodded and his face brightened. “Yes. Thanks again. The timing’s perfect.”

What? Oh. “I didn't get you a job on Motive. That was all you.”

Dean's grin was brilliant. “Yeah?”

It would be the first job of many. Castiel would see to it. “Yeah. When?”

“Right after Easter weekend.”

“So you're blocked out after Michael's wedding.”

Dean sipped his wine. “Yeah. Is that okay?”

“That’s a busy week. I wouldn't have seen much of you anyway.”

“I'm glad the timing's good for you. It’s important that I’m available when you need a date.”

The sting threaded its way through Castiel's chest. How could he forget what he was doing here?

Dean looked away, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“The timing's fine for me.” He'd forgotten. This was a business meeting, not a date. But it had felt so real, until the truth shattered it. “Perhaps we can meet the weekend after. I'll be in Vancouver again.”

“Good,” Dean said. “I'd—I'd like that.”

Their shared plate of salmon laid empty. Their waiter approached the table. “If you're ready, your table in the dining room is available.”

“Thank you,” Castiel said. He followed Dean to their table, and the Chateaubriand was there in minutes. He watched the server prepare it, racking his brains for a way to rescue this date. This meeting.

Maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all.
Maybe Dean shouldn't have gone ahead with eating at Hy's. Everybody did great, but Castiel had been embarrassed and he never relaxed. He nearly had, until Dean made that boneheaded comment about needing to be available, and the night spiraled down the drain.

First dates had room for nervousness, but this was like working with a reader for an audition. They read flat, the script in front of them just words. Dean always gave his readers respect. He reacted to their flat words with all the depth he would bring in front of a camera, and they'd get caught up in it and give back. Castiel was his reader. Dean had to draw him out.

They waited at the corner for the walk signal. Castiel's imposing hotel was nearby, but Dean wasn't going back to Castiel's room. He had to come up with something fast, or this date would be a flop.

“Do you mind going for a walk?”

Castiel tilted his head. “Where would you like to go?”

“Just up the street. I wanna show you something. Come on, it'll be fun.”

Dean was going to look like a fool if they weren't there. But it was Friday night, and it was warm. Somebody would be there.

Castiel nodded. “I'm curious.” He looked back to the signal light, still an orange-red hand. Their knuckles brushed together for the tenth time. Dean had let it happen, but Castiel hadn't taken his hand. Maybe Dean should make that move?

He stretched out his fingers.

The light changed, and Castiel stepped into the street just as their hands touched. He looked back in surprise.

Great. Just perfect. Dean hid his grimace and caught up to Castiel, matching his pace. Their hands brushed together again, and Dean slid his hand away. Castiel's hand chased his.

Could he do nothing right today?

Castiel caught his hand. Dean tried to laugh it off. “Awkward.”

“I'm nervous.” Castiel said it quietly, staring straight ahead. “I haven't been on a date in a long time.”

“I'm nervous too.” Dean squeezed Castiel's fingers. A blonde woman on the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery had a camera trained on them. She probably had a hundred shots of that handholding fiasco. “How long is a long time?”

Castiel gave him a half-smile. “Years.”

“Because you're so busy?”

Castiel shrugged. “Is that music?”

The cool thump of an upright bass floated up from concrete stairs leading underground. Dean's shoulders relaxed. They were here. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

He led Castiel under a faceted glass dome to an underground plaza. People gathered on the
polished concrete floor of an ice rink, ballroom dancing. They wore anything from casual clothes to suits and swirling skirts, dancing a foxtrot to Frank Sinatra.

Dean paused at the edge of the rink. “People meet down here when it's warm enough on Friday nights. Would you like to dance?”

***

Castiel's heart thumped. This was a piece of the city he never would have found on his own. Sodium lights turned everything yellow. *It Had to be You* echoed in the poor acoustics. It carried the romance of an old movie.

Castiel held out his hand. “Let's dance.”

He led them to the smooth floor. Dean set his left hand on Castiel's shoulder, laid his right in Castiel's grasp, and followed him. Castiel guided them into the crowd, his dancing skills rusty. People looked twice at them, but everyone who met his eyes smiled.

Dean was a better dancer than he was. He held them in frame, and followed Castiel through the traveling step Mother had taught him. He smiled at Castiel, warm and relaxed. “You're doing great.”
“I haven’t danced like this in a while.”

“I love dancing,” Dean said. “We could practice together. You could even learn follow.”

Castiel’s smile stretched his face—the real one that showed his gums, but he didn't tone it down. “How did you learn follow?”

“Teaching,” Dean said. “I’m a volunteer dancer with the summer group.”

“You're good.”

“Thanks. We could dance at the weddings.”

“Absolutely,” Castiel said. He could hire a coach. “Can you waltz?”

“Can I waltz,” Dean chuckled. “Traditional and Viennese. I can tango, Argentine tango, jive, west and east coast swing, blues dancing, salsa, and cha-cha-cha. I'll sweep you off your feet.”

Castiel's heart leapt. “You do that often?”

Dean chuckled. “No. Most people can’t dance.”

So this was a thing. “Do you take a lot of dates here?”

“I've never taken a date here.”

*Until now.*

Castiel caught his breath. The song ended, and their dance wound to a halt. “Do you want to dance another?”

Dean stepped into his arms again. “There’s three things I could do all night, and dancing’s one of them.”

He could make it so real. Castiel felt it all the way down to the quiver in his knees. All Dean had to do was smile and his heart tripped. Dean's love of dancing had swept Castiel away.

Dean drew closer and sang a line from *Witchcraft* into Castiel's ear. His mouth went dry.

So real.

“Another?” The lights sparkled in Dean's gold-flecked green eyes. Castiel wanted another. He wanted the world and time to stand still.

This shouldn’t be happening.

Dean's smile faltered. “Everything okay?”

“Yes,” Castiel said. “I was just thinking how much this felt like a real date.”

“I'm glad.” Dean glanced away. When he looked back his face was smooth, courteously smiling.

The spell had been broken.

Castiel was safe.

“I should get back to the hotel.”
“Okay.” Dean stepped back.

“There’s still the matter of the—paperwork.” Castiel thought of the contract. The contract was the truth. This hadn't been a date. It was a job. Dean's job.

Dean's smile faltered. “Right. I suppose you have the papers in your room.”

“I'll have them delivered to your home, and then you can send them to the office. Is that acceptable?”

Dean watched the dancers for a moment. “That'll work. I guess I'll see you next Friday at the wedding.”

A chasm had opened between them. Castiel stood on his side and tried not to look down. “Will you be okay on the bus?”

Dean blinked. “Of course. Good-night, Castiel. I had a good time.”

Castiel gave him a small smile. “So did I.”

They parted ways at the corner, Dean heading east to catch a bus back to Burnaby. He didn't look back to where Castiel still stood on the corner, watching him walk away.

Dean said he'd had a good time. Castiel wished that had been true.
Leather

Dean was up first thing in the morning, but Chuck got home before the courier arrived. He cradled his laptop case and grunted in response to Dean's greeting.

“You look tired,” Dean said. A car drove past the front room's picture window, and Dean silently prayed for it to go away. “I'll let you go to bed.”

“I can stay up.” Chuck opened his messenger bag and set his laptop on the dining room's sideboard, plugging it in. “How was your date last night?”

“Turns out Castiel's assistant booked us a reservation at Hy's,” Dean said.

Chuck shuffled into the kitchen and rummaged through the cupboard they used to store cold remedies and medicine. “Oh, ouch. Awkward. Where'd you go?”

“We stayed there.”

“You didn't.” He palmed a pair of ibuprofen and swallowed them dry.

“Headache?” Dean asked. “I'll keep it down while you sleep.”

“Are you going out with him again?”

“Actually...yeah. Next Friday.”

Chuck stuck his head in the fridge and found a can of ginger ale. “Dinner again?”

“A wedding.”

“Oh, crap. No pressure.”

“I need a tux, it's formal.”

“Dude. Can you afford that?”

Dean sipped his coffee and glanced at Chuck. “He's paying for it. Weird, right?”

Chuck shrugged. “If he really wants you to go with him. A wedding for date number two, though?”

“Yeah.” Time for a topic change. “Do you want me to tell him about you?”

Chuck reared backward, eyes wide. “Don't tell him about me, or Paranormal. You'll put him on the spot.”

That did the trick. “Chuck, your script is really good.”

Chuck gulped his ginger ale. “I'm not ready. I've got to write the whole thing. The story's too important to get changed around by a producer.”

An idling engine paused in the driveway, and Dean dashed to get the door before the courier could ring the--

Ding-dong!
Chuck stared at the door. “Who could that be?”

“It’s for me.” Dean swung open the door.

“Dean Winchester?” the courier asked. She smiled at him and handed over a big plastic envelope. “Sign here, please.”

Dean signed. Chuck had followed, standing in the middle of the living room. “What's that?”

“How I'm gonna pay for my tux,” Dean said. “Are you sure I should keep quiet about your show? Seriously? He's the guy in charge, you'd never get a better chance--”

“I should get to bed.” Chuck set the empty can on the counter. “See you at dinner.”

Dean hid in his room before Kevin could get up and start asking questions.

Castiel had included a prepaid return envelope. Dean initialed and signed next to Castiel's signature, the abstract sweep of someone who had to sign their name a dozen times a day. Should it be witnessed? Dean swept the thought away. No one would contest this contract, so it didn't matter.

He filed his copy, backed up the electronic version to his dropbox, and sealed up the original to send back to Seattle.

He had a lot of shopping to do.

He made a friend at Harry Rosen and let him decide what Dean needed for a new spring wardrobe. After three hours on Saturday he had alteration tickets on five suits, a bag full of shirts that went beyond plain white (and made him feel seasick when he looked at the price tags,) along with belts, ties, cufflinks, shoes, and designer jeans.

He didn't need a new set of riding leathers, but he bought them, including a black jacket with a buttery high collar, generous vents, and accordion pleated gussets behind the arms. The scent of brand new leather rose around him as he left the store.

But his plan to ride his Harley to Seattle got kiboshed by rain. He wound up renting a no-frills Hyundai Accent to get to downtown Seattle. He handed the keys to the valet in front of the Hotel 1000 and a bellman took his bags, balancing them on a luggage cart.

A keycard was waiting for him at the front desk—Castiel had already checked in.

His middle did a nervous little dance as he rode the elevator. He knew all about living in a single room with other people, but that had been with Sam and his father, not the guy who'd hired him. But it would be okay. If it wasn't, he'd just go to Sam's place. He plucked an American twenty from his wallet and gave it to the bellman with a smile and a thank you and stepped inside the room.

The floor lurched under his feet.

There was only one bed.

Dean checked the adjoining door. Locked. He scanned the room, looking for an explanation.

Elliott Bay lay beyond the windows, gray and choppy with the rain. The walls were painted a buttery shade, contrasted with a gray-washed navy blue. The furniture was modern and
uncomplicated. A leather bag sat on a chair. Castiel had been there, but he wasn't here now.

Only one bed. Dean moved closer. It was a king size, plush with a duvet and too many pillows. The mattress yielded under his hands, soft with memory foam. He sat and stared straight into the bathroom.

“Son of a bitch.”

A wall of glass showed him a pedestal tub. Beyond it stood a glass-walled shower and vanity sink. The toilet must have been behind the frosted glass door, thank God, but would Castiel want to watch him shower and bathe? Would he sit on the bed with two fingers of scotch while Dean undressed and slid into the tub, washing himself with a sudsy sponge?

Fuck. He'd do it for a boyfriend in a heartbeat. Just thinking about it made his dick wake up. But this was exactly what Castiel claimed was off-limits.

Dean needed to get out of here.

The door clicked open. Dean scrambled to his feet.

“Dean? There were supposed to be two beds. I apologize.” Castiel wore a pearl-gray morning suit with a pink rose boutonniere. His hair looked wind ruffled, and he'd shaved his face so smooth Dean wanted to touch it.

Dean waved at the glass wall. “What about this voyeur's delight of a bathroom?”

He pointed near the ceiling. “There's a privacy blind.”

“Oh.”

“The room is yours.” Castiel slid his hand inside the breast pocket of his morning coat. “I don't live far from here.”

“You don't have to do that.” He could stay with Sam.

“I do. This is inappropriate.” He held out his keycard to Dean.

“Are you sure?”

“I'm certain. Please, take it.”

Dean took it. Their fingers brushed. “Thanks. You look nice.”

Castiel looked him up and down, from the beard stubble to his new leather jacket to his boots. “You look rakish.”

Dean wiped his hands on the legs of his jeans. “Figured I'd wait to shave until later. I clean up pretty good.”

“I recall.” Castiel opened the hall closet and pulled out a suit bag. “I ordered you a light meal from room service. Supper isn't until eight-thirty.”

Dean's empty stomach approved of this plan. “Does your definition of light meal include cheeseburgers?”

“You mentioned them fondly. Sliders okay?”
Castiel had remembered that Dean liked cheeseburgers and ordered them for him. Dean's smile could have lit the room. That was...that was sweet. “Sliders are perfect. Thank you.”

Castiel picked up the leather bag on the chair. “I have to attend the groom. I'll see you at the wedding.”

Dean felt a pang when the door closed. He wished there had been two beds. Or that they had plans to do something the next day. He wished he had a reason to be around Castiel, to get to know him better.

Dean shook his head. Castiel didn’t hire him to get to know him better. He was here to look pretty, charm Castiel’s mother, and be a good date. It was a business connection, and that was all.

***

Dean had been ready to bolt at the sight of that room. Castiel couldn't blame him. It looked like a love trap, with one bed and that bathroom. But Dean hadn't stormed out and gone back to Vancouver. Castiel had made it right.

Michael answered Lucas's door, stepping back to let Castiel inside. “You're not changing in your suite?”

“There was a mixup. The room's a single. I let Dean have it to himself.”

Michael nodded. “So you haven't--”

That wasn’t any of Michael's business. “You could use the moral support. And someone who can tie a bow tie.”

Michael scoffed. “I can tie a bow tie.”

“I can tie a bow tie and it'll look good.”

Michael lifted his hands in surrender. “You have the ring, right?”

Castiel scoffed. “Of course I do. Run your vows one more time.”

Michael cleared his throat and began. Castiel listened while he undressed, switching from the formal clothes they'd worn for daytime pictures to evening wear. Lucas pretended to swoon when Michael recited, “You inspire me to be the best person I can be” for the sixteenth time that day.

Castiel kept reason and order. Lucas kept Michael laughing, and together they herded their oldest brother to the white-ribboned room where the guests waited, all eyes trained on the entrance for the bride's arrival.

Hael looked perfect. She would have brought the building down if she'd turned out in anything less. She'd planned some of the details of her wedding when she was a child, and she fought tooth and nail to get them. She floated down the aisle in a princess gown with the full skirt little girls drew when dreaming of this day. Her hair fell in curls that brushed along her back, a crown of white flowers on her head. The tension that had wedged itself between her brows in the final weeks of planning had been smoothed with a happy glow.

Castiel and Lucas had bets on when Michael was going to lose it. Their oldest brother had sworn he’d keep it together, but his voice broke as he was saying his vows. Castiel's heart wrenched when a tearful Hael reached up to cup Michael's face in her hands. The whole room held its breath,
caught utterly under her spell.

Michael fell apart, and her gentle words and soft hands put him back together to the complete silence of the attendees. They were alone in that room for everyone to see, and Castiel forgave her every steel-spined insistence that this wedding go exactly the way she wanted. When they kissed, Castiel couldn't breathe.

He knew the light in Michael's eyes, knew what it felt like to feel complete danger and utter safety resting in the body of the most important person in the world, who looked back at you with everything you felt.

Castiel had to get out of here. He couldn't--

Lucas planted one hand on his shoulder and Castiel leaned into him. He let his brother hold him down while his heart broke again, the edges just as jagged as they had been seven years ago.

***

Dean did his best to pay attention, but weddings were boring if you didn't have a stake in them. He spent most of it looking at Castiel in black tie. His hair was neatly combed, and Dean longed to mess it up. He lingered over a particularly pleasant way to set it on end. It helped the minutes pass. Soon they would get up and go eat. Dance. Have a drink or two, courtesy of the open bar.

Michael said vows he'd probably written himself about love forever and such things, but the room shifted, leaning forward as one. Dean swept aside visions of kissing Castiel senseless and focused. Michael had stopped speaking his vows, and Hael had dropped her bouquet to cup his face in her hands.

Wow. The part of Dean that mined every expression and gesture while people-watching studied every detail about Michael in that moment, from posture to the wobble in his voice. It was a portrait of deep love overwhelmed by feeling. Dean committed it to memory. Maybe he could use it one day.

Castiel covered his mouth, and the gesture dragged Dean's attention back. He was crumbling up there, behind the tight pin of his mouth and the cords standing out on his neck, his throat clenched like a fist to keep from weeping. Castiel radiated pain. It thrust through his skin like thorns.

Dean didn’t pay attention to Michael and Hael walking up the aisle, all smiles and entwined hands. Castiel stayed behind with his other brother, younger twin Lucas. He laid his hand on Castiel's shoulder, saying something that made Castiel shake his head.

The guests rose from folding chairs and mingled their way to the reception hall. Dean's footsteps carried him to Castiel, trembling under Lucas's hand.

“It's been seven years,” Lucas said. “It's time. Let it out.”

Castiel looked up. Lucas scowled, ready to dismiss Dean, but Dean stepped closer.

“It stopped raining. There's twenty minutes before dinner. Do you want to go for a walk?”

“Excuse us,” Lucas said. “But we're--”

Castiel broke out of Lucas's grip. “I need some fresh air.”

He groped for Dean's hand, and they headed outside.
A brace of photographers fired off pictures as Castiel and Dean left the building. Dean shielded his eyes. He'd probably never run a gauntlet of media. Perhaps Anna could teach Dean about that.

“Ignore them,” Castiel said. “They won't follow us.”

Dean blinked, trying to clear his vision. “Were those fans?”

“They're here for Balthazar.”

“I saw him. I might have freaked out a little.”

Castiel chuckled. “Do you want to meet him?”

Dean shook his head. “I don't think I could keep my cool, honestly. I watched all his films growing up. I trained in Meisner because of him. Where does he keep all his Oscars?”

“Random places,” Castiel said. “There's one in the barn.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Wet streets reflected streetlight like scattered jewels as they walked uphill. Castiel breathed in the scent of rain. “Are you going to ask me to talk about it?”

“No. I just had to get you out of there,” Dean said. “It didn't look like you were ready to have that moment.”

Castiel rubbed his thumb along the back of Dean's hand. “Lucas wanted me to talk about it. Like bloodletting, or drawing the poison from a snakebite.”

“You don't have to tell me.” Dean didn't look at him with pity. “I mean, I'll listen if you want, but you don't have to tell me.”

Dean respected his private feelings, and it was like a breeze from the water, clean and cleansing. Why couldn't his family take that attitude?

Maybe he would understand, if Castiel told him. Or maybe he wouldn't. “The spotlight should be on Hael. This is her day.”

“She seems...strong,” Dean said. “I don't think I'd like my life after I crossed her.”

Castiel gave a thin smile. “You wouldn't.”

“Okay, here's the plan,” Dean said. “Game faces on. Get through it, we'll leave early. People can think what they want about that. But we can walk again, or whatever you need to do, Cas.”

The nickname rolled off Dean's tongue. It slid over Castiel's scalp like soft fingers and gentle whispers.

A motorcycle engine sounded over the hum of traffic. Castiel held his breath.

“You okay?”
Castiel relaxed his grip on Dean's hand. “I'm okay.”

He counted their steps as the sound faded away.

They rounded the corner. Dean was content with silence, but Castiel needed something to focus on besides the inside of his own head and the screaming ache in his chest.

“So,” he asked. “Did you ever get married?”

“No.”

Castiel already knew that. “Why not?”

Dean shrugged. “I never met a girl or a guy I fell that hard for. That sounds bad, saying it out loud.”

“So you're bisexual.”

“Yeah. Do I have to whip out the PSA about how we're not greedy sluts? Not that there's anything wrong with that.”

“No,” Castiel said. “Love is about people, not parts.”

“Exactly,” Dean said. “You too?”

Castiel laughed. “I kissed my first boy when I was five, and I never quit.”

Three steps of silence. “Your family supports you.”

Castiel glanced at him. “Yours doesn't.”

“My old man got pretty sore when he found out. Said he should have known when I started with all that fairy drama stuff and he wouldn't tolerate it under his roof. I left.” Dean stared off into the distance, like it never hurt him or his brave face.

Castiel didn't know what to say. “I'm sorry.”

Dean bumped Castiel's shoulder. “He got over it. Sort of. He still asks why I can't just choose to be normal, since I like girls too.”

“Ouch.”

“At that point I tell him I'm hanging up, and we try again next Christmas.”

Castiel squeezed his hand. “Maybe next time.”

“Or Sam's wedding. That's what you'll have to look forward to. Good news, huh?”

Castiel cocked his head. “You want me to come with you?”

“Why not? It won't be fancy. Not like this.” Dean nodded toward the hotel. “If you already planned your business trip--”

“I didn't.” Castiel's heart did a funny little flutter. “I'll—I'd be honored to accompany you, Dean.”

Dean smiled. “Great. Yeah. It'll be fun.”
“I'll go with you. Thank you, Dean.”

Dean really was beautiful when he smiled. “Let's go inside and have a good time, okay?”
Whiskey

Michael didn't like him. Lucas was reserving judgement. Mr. and Mrs. Novak were too far away to talk to. Castiel's sister wasn't even here. He wanted to ask, but he left it alone. He ate his pork tenderloin and kept his remarks to sympathetic noises or questions that invited somebody else to do most of the talking.

The dance began and Castiel had to get up and dance with the bridal party. Dean made his way to the line of people waiting for a drink at the bar. The silk-clad women would tell him who they were wearing rather than a story of how it was found and remade into something pretty. Every man was in a tailor-fitted jacket. Castiel had been right to tell him to buy a tuxedo, and the man who helped him choose it was right to insist on peaked lapels and waistcoat. Dean looked right. He fit in.

He watched the crowd and shuffled closer to the bar. A man watched him, and a nod in greeting netted him a pearly-white, chin dimpled smile. He came closer and Dean braced himself.

“Hello. Dash LaCroix.” His jaw was so square you could frame a house with it.

“Dean Winchester.”

“Like the rifle.” Dash held onto his hand just a little too long. “Did you enjoy the ceremony?”

“Ah, I'm the plus one,” Dean smiled. “I don't know the bride and groom.”

Dash fell into the line beside him. Maybe he was just jumping ahead of the others. “Michael and Hael are old friends. What are you drinking?”

Dean scanned the bottles of scotch and asked for a Macallan.

“I'll have the same,” Dash said. “It's one of my favorites.”

Dean shrugged. “I've never tried it.”

“I hope you enjoy it as much as I plan to.” Dash had a sip, still watching Dean.

Dean smiled. “Dash, are you flirting with me?”

He stepped closer. “That depends. Are there butterflies in your stomach?”

Dean laughed. “Okay, you're cute. But I did show up here with a date.”

“The best man. I noticed. That serious?”

“We met recently.”

Dash cocked his head. “You don't sound smitten.”

Dean smiled and shook his head. “I burn slow. Keep my wits about me.”

“You're a cool one,” Dash said. “So is he. You might have trouble finding something to ignite.”

Dean found Castiel dancing with the maid of honor. Their eyes met, and Castiel's polite smile widened into a warm grin and a wink.
“Oh, I think I'll manage.” Dean watched Castiel dance. “I hope you enjoy your scotch, Dash.”

He left the man where he stood and wove through the crowd. He nearly walked into Ezekiel.

“Dean.”

“Mr. Fraser. How are you?”

“Call me Zeke.” He broke away from the group he’d been talking to and led the way to the terrace. “How’s it going so far?”

“Good,” Dean said. “Going smoothly.” He wondered where Ezekiel kept his Oscar. He decided not to ask.

The air was cool and smelled of the sea. Ezekiel leaned against the railing, looking at the street below. “I wanted to thank you for pulling Castiel away when you did. You have good instincts. It's exactly what he needed.”

Dean shrugged. “I just did what I thought was right.”

“I don't agree with what he's doing with you.” Ezekiel leaned his elbows on the railing, his back turned to the street. “I understand it, but I don't agree.”

Somebody had to try chasing him off. It was tradition. “And you want me to stop?”

“I won't tell you to do that.”

Dean nodded, slowly. “So you want me to be careful.”

Ezekiel tipped his glass toward Dean. “You have good instincts. It makes you a good actor. You pay attention.”

“Thank you.” If he meant it, it was quite a compliment.

“Don't stop paying attention, Dean. Don't forget what you're doing here.”

Ah. That was a warning. You're playing a role. Pretending to belong. Don't get too comfortable.

“I won't.” Dean sipped his scotch. It smelled like smoke, tasted like tears. “I'm glad he has people who care about him.”

Ezekiel gave him an assessing look. “You like him.”

“I do,” Dean said. “And that's good. It makes the job easier.”

“Castiel's got people who care about him. You alone in this?”

“I'll be okay.” Dean drained the last of his scotch. Damn. He'd meant to nurse that.

Ezekiel put his hand out for Dean's glass. “Let's get another.”

“Bad idea. Let's do it.”

Ezekiel smirked and led the way inside, waving at Castiel.

Castiel had high color in his cheeks. His blue eyes were bright as he took Dean's hand. “There you are. Everything good?”
“Yeah. Mr. Fraser and I were just talking.”

“Zeke,” Ezekiel corrected.

Dean smiled. “Zeke.”

Castiel grinned. “Time for that dance?”

“You bet,” Dean said. “Zeke, we'll get that drink later?”

“Sure.” Ezekiel patted Castiel's shoulder. “Cas, bring him to the game.”

Castiel broke into a glowing smile. “Thanks, Zeke.”

He led Dean to the floor, but It Had to Be You ended as they arrived. “Drat. We missed our song.”

Castiel bumped his shoulder. “That's our song?”

“Sure.” Castiel's hair was still tidy. He still had a mission for tonight. “First dance of our first date, wasn't it?”

“A sixty year old big band tune is our song?” Castiel's eyes crinkled into amusement.

“It's older than that. A ninety year old big band tune is our song.”

Castiel stood taller in frame and took control, guiding Dean exactly where he wanted them to go. They danced to Etta James, and Castiel's hand at his back was firm.

“Not that you weren't already fine last week, but you're sweeping me off my feet, here.”

“I brought in a coach,” Castiel confessed.

Dean spread his fingers over Castiel's shoulder. “Did you learn follow?”

“Is being on top important to you, Dean?”

Dean laughed. “I'm versatile.”

Castiel suddenly looked like a man with a lot on his mind. “I'm learning follow. I'm just not good at it yet.”

“Is being on top important to you, Cas?”

Castiel cocked his head and smirked. “Would that be a problem?”

Oh. Oh holy shit. Dean swallowed. Every place their bodies touched lit up. “I--”

“Forgive me,” Castiel said. “That was inappropriate.”

“It's alright. It's a fair question.”

Castiel turned them with the crowd. “All the same. I put you on the spot.”

“You were just teasing me back,” Dean said. “It's alright, Cas.”

Dean kept thinking about it until the song ended. Castiel led him back to their table, where Castiel's mother and yet-to-be married brother sat shoulder to shoulder, talking.
He'd been expecting Naomi Novak to be a nightmare in couture with icewater in her veins, but she smiled when they arrived. “You two made a handsome picture out there.”

Dean bowed his head. “Thank you, Mrs. Novak. Do you have a few minutes to dance?”

Her smile widened. “I've been looking forward to it.”

He led her out to dance a smooth, leisurely foxtrot. She was light in his arms, fluid in following. “You're an excellent dancer, Mrs. Novak.”

“So are you. Where did you learn?”

“Arthur Murray. I learned for acting.”

“Has it been useful for your work?”

It hadn't hurt for this one. “Once or twice,” Dean said. “Where did you learn?”

A shadow passed over Mrs. Novak's blue eyes. “I started dancing as a little girl.”

Dean guided her tall figure into a promenade. “And then you learned ballroom?”

“Castiel's father and I were in a club in college. That's how we met.”

“That's romantic.”

Mrs. Novak peered at him. “Are you a romantic, Dean?”

Dean led her into a corner turn. “Promise not to tell anyone?”

“I think my son already knows.”

Castiel knew the truth, but this dishonesty did no harm. Dean gave her a shy, charming smile and danced her over the floor.

***

Castiel hadn't expected the sight of Dean dancing with his mother would make him feel bittersweet. His mother's hopeful smile made him ache. Dean charmed her with an expert foxtrot, and the warm glow in his chest wasn't from finishing his third scotch. Dean was doing a great job. He made a great boyfriend.

Lucas came back with another round, and Castiel picked his up. “You got doubles.”

“The line took forever.” Lucas perched a third glass in front of Dean's place. “They look good out there.”

“I was just thinking that.”

“Mother likes him. He's not a disaster. And he's hot.” Lucas leaned against Castiel's shoulder. “You should fuck him.”

Castiel nearly dropped his scotch. “What?”

Lucas laughed. “The look on your face. What's stopping you? He's got a real pretty mouth.”

“Lucas.”
“Get it out of your system, brother.” Lucas elbowed him and grinned. “There was steam coming off you two when you were dancing. Go get some.”

Castiel’s body didn’t get a vote. That wasn't part of the deal. “This is our second date.”

“You have a hotel room.”

Castiel shoved Lucas's shoulder. “So do you. Go find Sarah and tell her you're drunk.”

Lucas pasted on an innocent look when Dean led Mother back to the table. “Did he pass inspection, Mother?”

“With flying colors,” Naomi said.

Dean grasped the back of a chair, ready to pull it out. “Thank you for the dance, Mrs. Novak. Would you like to sit down?”

She patted his cheek. It was as good as fixing his hair or straightening his lapels. That warmed Castiel's heart too, as if she approved of the guy Castiel was truly hopeful about. “If you'll excuse me? I need to find my husband.”

Lucas pushed his chair back. “I should find Sarah.”

They left Castiel and Dean alone.

It would make sense to touch Dean’s hand, to cover it with his own, to stroke just under the knuckle with his thumb. “You looked good out there.”

Dean kept his hand just where it was. “Do you want to dance again?”

Castiel offered him the double scotch. Lucas always pushed the limit, and this double was two drinks over the line. “I think I'm finished dancing for tonight.”

Cragganmore wasn't meant to be quaffed, but Dean took a long swallow in an effort to catch up. “Do you want to mingle, or get out of here?”

He should go home. Go home, far away from temptation. “I think I want to walk you up to your room, Dean.”

Dean sucked in a breath, his eyes dark. His lips parted and his tongue licked out. Would he accept? Politely decline? They shouldn’t.

Dean nodded. “Okay.”

He should just leave his drink there, unfinished. The scotch was already taking hold of his tongue. He tilted the bottom of his glass up, draining the last of the whiskey. Dean followed suit, setting his glass on the table.

The tension in the air had Castiel on his toes. They stood shoulder to shoulder, never looking at each other as the elevator took them to Dean's floor. Castiel should have chosen someone who didn’t draw him in, someone who wasn’t quite so beautiful.

But it wasn’t just his looks, was it? Dean was kind. He’d gotten Castiel away from his brother, gave him a chance to pull himself together, didn’t try to pry him open, didn’t pity him. And now his heart pounded just standing next to Dean, wondering if he was alone in feeling like something was going to happen.
He turned his head. Dean looked at him, tongue wetting his lips. He glanced away, looked back.

Dean felt it too.

Castiel’s blood rushed as Dean stepped out of the elevator, leaving him to follow.

Dean opened the door and held it for Castiel. He stopped in the doorway, toes on the threshold. Dean had invited him. He stood back, left hand on the door keeping it open.

They shouldn't. They couldn't.

“I had a good time, Dean.”

Dean smiled. “I did too.”

He burned to step through. He kept his feet on the medallion patterned carpet in the hallway. “I should go home.”

Dean squinted at him. “Are you okay to drive?”

He wasn't. He'd had enough whiskeys to want what he shouldn't. He wouldn't drive drunk.

Not ever. “I don't live far. I can walk.”

“You can stay here,” Dean said. “Just to sleep.”

Next to him, in the only bed. Castiel planted his feet. “I can't do that.”

“Why not?”

Silly question. “Because I want to kiss you.”

Dean pulled his tie loose with one hand. “I want to kiss you, too.”

Castiel was next to him in a breath. Their heartbeats collided as they pressed together. Dean slid his arms around Castiel's shoulders, leaned in.

“Stay still,” Castiel whispered.

Dean stopped moving.

Castiel dragged his nails up the back of Dean's neck and skimmed his fingers through velvety short hair. Dean shivered. His lips parted and it was how Castiel imagined, only more. Castiel touched their lips together and kissed a man for the first time in years.

Dean's eyes slipped shut. He dug his fingers into Castiel's shoulders. A quiet sound from his throat made Castiel come alive. His mouth, that beautiful mouth softened, opened. He tasted like whiskey, smelled like sandalwood. Castiel couldn't stop the shivers that slid over his scalp like tiny stars. And then Dean pressed closer, his fingers deep in Castiel's hair.
He was hard. Dean’s ass was full and round in Castiel’s hands. Dean shuddered, moaned again. He’d sound like a song in bed, sung for Castiel’s hands and his mouth and his cock. It was Castiel’s turn to shiver. Just a few steps and they would be on the bed--

He couldn’t do this. Castiel relaxed his grip and drew back. “We’d better stop.”

Dean looked half lost, his eyes huge and dark. “Yeah. We—whoa.”

Castiel had done this to him, made him feel that. “You okay?”

Dean gave him a shaky smile. “I. Um.”

“Need a minute?”

“I need ten.” Dean shook his head like he was trying to clear it. “You knocked my socks off. It’s been a while.”

“That’s why I should go home.” He couldn’t resist one more kiss, one that stayed gentle even with Dean’s inviting, open mouth. “Good-night, Dean.”

Dean stepped back. “Good-night, Cas. Be safe.”
Castiel let the door click shut and hurried away before he could knock.

***

Dean stood still and listened. Castiel's footsteps retreated, moving fast over the muffling carpet. That kiss had hit them both like a truck. Dean's mouth tingled, carried the taste of Castiel's tongue, still felt the gentle press of his mouth deepening until Dean had let him in. If he'd stayed--

Trouble. They were in trouble.

Dean stripped out of his jacket, unfastened his cufflinks and shirt studs. This didn't happen to him. He didn't get hard from a kiss, even if it made every nerve stand on end and kindled a slow fire low in his belly. Castiel had taken over, and if he had a few things to learn about leading on the dance floor, he needed no advice when it came to kissing.

He rubbed his fingers over his mouth, but he couldn't banish the feeling. Every time they kissed in public he'd remember this. A peck on the cheek would carry the flex of Castiel's fingers sliding down his back to squeeze his ass. A hello kiss would push Castiel's chest into his, would feel like his fingers threading through Castiel's silky hair, would sound like the moan that rose from Dean's throat.

He started a shower on autopilot, steam puffing over the ceiling. Maybe it should be ice-cold. This was going to be harder—more difficult—than Dean had assumed. He'd thought Castiel distant, uncomfortable with people and difficult to set at ease. But he was also funny and considerate, and his kisses could make an angel blaspheme. If Castiel were a fireman or a construction worker or a tech--

No. Castiel was his boss. He'd hired Dean because he didn't want entanglements. Castiel would date someone in his league, like that guy Dash--someone who belonged in his world.

Dean didn’t belong.

He tipped his head back and let water spill over his face. Nice clothes, luxury hotels, public dates. That’s what Dean was there for. He scrubbed his fingers over his lips, trying to dull the memory of that kiss.
Selfies

Castiel's phone vibrated with another text from Dean, but Castiel wouldn't look at it until he'd read this email from his location manager. The historical society was blocking up negotiations to use houses in Queen's Park, even though the exterior changes they wanted to make would make the locations more historically authentic.

They cited disturbance to the neighborhood, and they weren't wrong. A location shoot took up a lot of space with all the big trailers and equipment, and they'd have to be on location for weeks. Castiel had made generous offers, but the board had dug in their heels and the clock was ticking. If they were going to get the flowerbeds their set designer wanted for visual symbolism, they didn't have much time to landscape all the locations.

He added his comments on the internal communications for location and set design, and reached for his phone. It was time to see what Dean had sent him.

Castiel hadn't meant to send all those gifts. The hyacinths had been an apology for his behavior on the night of the wedding; for the kiss he ought to regret. Dean had sent back a grainy photograph of himself sitting next to the potted plant, touching one of the blossoms with a dreamy expression. He sent the photo with a caption: “No one ever gave me flowers before.”

It touched off a storm.

Castiel went online and bought him cashmere sweaters in classic colors. Dean had sent back photographs of him wearing them. The first had been of him in the gray sweater over a shirt and bow-tie, wearing silver wire-rimmed spectacles with his hair slicked back. The last had been of him in the green, wearing the sweater over bare skin with the sleeves pushed up. His gaze on the camera was so heated Castiel had to brace himself to look back. He'd captioned that last photo with “These are all perfect.”

What was perfect was the notch at the base of his throat.

He should have stopped then. He bought Dean a thick Egyptian cotton bathrobe. The photo Dean sent back exposed half his lean body—nearly hairless, with the notch above his hipbones deep and sensual. His face wasn't in the photo, but his lips were, slightly parted with the tiniest peek of tongue.

He'd sent Dean a shaving kit, but Dean was on set. He probably had left before the package arrived. But Dean sent him pictures of the set and the location and silly selfies of him with crew and extras. He'd put some of those up on his Instagram, and Castiel had hearted every one.

Dean had sent a text message instead of a photograph. Two things. One. I got my STD screening tests back and I am clear. Two. I'm getting a ton of followers on Instagram and weird email. Has the media frenzy begun?

Castiel ran a search and found a picture of him and Dean holding hands outside the hotel. The photos were from a Tumblr user named netwatchangel. They were captioned, “PLOT TWIST.”

It was tagged: #castiel novak #netwatch #Grosvenor Lane #omg #HE'S GAY I CANNOT HANDLE IT #look at his date #LOOK AT HIM #WHAT A DREAMBOAT #imagine them kissing #haha suckit castielslady #choke on your own wank.

Oh hell. Castielslady.
He checked the notes and found her response: “You're all stupid. This is a PR stunt because all the tumblrina's demands for artificial diversity shoved down our throats. The guy's been hired to hold Castiel's hand, get some pictures taken, and then he'll get a nice acting career at the end.”

Castiel blinked. That was...scarily accurate.

He found another response: “His name is Dean Winchester. He lives in Vancouver. Here's his IMDB. Here's his Instagram. Most of his pictures are either selfies or food.”

Fans worked fast.

He sent Dean a message. **They found you. Pictures from Michael's wedding.**

Okay. What should I do?

**Don't answer any emails. Don't give anyone individual attention. Don't use location tracking on your pictures.**

I don't anyway.

**I think you should come down for some media training. My sister Anna is the director of PR.**

What about the weird emails?

**How weird?**

Most of them are hyper-excited about us kissing. But there's one sending creepy messages with blank subjects. The first one said, “You will never get between us.” As if you two are together or something.

Castiel caught his breath. **What's the email address?**

castielslady@mail.com. Do you know this person?

Castiel's throat went tight. **Don't delete them. I want to see them.**

Cas, should I be freaked out?

**We need to talk. Call me as soon as you get home.**

***

Dean hated the phrase “we need to talk.” It churned in his guts as he rode home from North Vancouver, handling the heavy Electra-Glide with an easy hand. His phone buzzed inside his jacket just as he'd turned into the alley behind his house, and it could wait until he'd parked.

He rolled into the garage and parked next to Baby, her long black chassis covered in a dust tarp. He patted her roof as he left the garage, hauling his kit across the yard to let himself in the kitchen door.

Roast chicken and the sugary tang of sweet potatoes filled the air. Aaron took over the cooking during Pesach, and Dean would not complain about the scattering of cooking tools all over the kitchen. The dinners made up for the chaos he caused in the preparation.

Aaron himself appeared in the doorway. “Your boyfriend sent you another gift. It smells good.”
A box cutter lay on top of the package. Castiel had sent him something new every day, even though it wasn’t his birthday or any reason, really. Great gifts. The sort of things Dean wanted but never felt he could justify buying for himself. Dean checked his phone. “Kevin called. Are we out of milk?”

“I brought some home. Come on, what’s in the box?”

Dean shook his head and sliced through the tape. It did smell good, like fragrance. How could Dean send Cas a thank you selfie of him using fragrance? The bathrobe had been pretty daring. Was Cas daring him to go further?

Kevin pounded up the stairs, lurching into the kitchen. “Dean! Did you get my text?”

“I was on the bike. What is it?”

Kevin thrust his phone in Dean’s face. It displayed a photo of him and Cas.

Dean shrugged. “That’s us. They were really there to take pictures of Balthazar.”

Aaron’s eyes bugged out. “Balthazar was at the wedding?”

Dean set the box cutter down. “Family friend apparently. He keeps one of his Oscars in the barn.”

Kevin nudged Dean’s arm. “Dean, read the notes.”

Dean scrolled the screen. “I’m a manslut. Ooh. Ass-candy. Two guys holding hands in public doesn't mean anything, calm down. What is this?”

“Castiel has fans.”

Dean kept scrolling. “Oh, this one says we're cute together and can you just imagine--”

He clicked that message and read the rest. “Oh my God.”

Kevin grimaced. “Yeah.”

“You shouldn't put soap up there. Somebody's got to tell them.”

Kevin looked horrified. “Dean!”

“Just saying.” Dean handed Kevin's phone back. “I gotta make a call, yell when it's ready.”

He headed into his room and sprawled across his bed before dialing Castiel's number.

“Dean.”

“Hey. My roommates know I'm famous on Tumblr.” Dean dragged a pillow down and rested his head. “Did you see the shower sex one?”

“I'll look for it later,” Castiel said. “Do you know how to set up filters in gmail?”

“Hang on, I need my computer.” Dean scooted down to the foot of his bed and juggled his mouse. The screen popped up, and Dean started clicking. “What do I do?”

Castiel gave clear instructions, and messages auto-forwarded to Castiel's work email.

Dean clicked around his email, searching for messages that were from anyone he knew. “So is
“castielslady familiar to you?”

“Yes,” Castiel said. “I've known about her for months. She's obsessed.”

Dean looked up at the ceiling. “Super. And now she's mad at me for dating you.”

“And that worries me.”

Dean searched for castielslady and found her blog. The latest messages were all angry responses to the photo of him and Castiel's hand-holding. “Wow, Cas. She kinda hit the nail on the head with her argument that it was for PR.”

“Coincidence. She claims I visit her in dreams.”

“Seriously, in dreams?”

“Yes.” Keys clacked as Castiel typed something at lightning speed. “She writes them out in detail. Any picture of me contains messages to her that she can read, from the way I hold my head to what I've got in my hands.”

“And now your stalker is stalking me too.”

“Technically, she's not my stalker. She's never tried to contact me.”

“I wish I could say the same.” Dean breathed in the fragrance of the hyacinths flowering by his bed.

“I'm writing a memo to our Security department. Can you come to Seattle next week? I'd like you to meet my specialist.”

“Sure. So, don't respond to her, right?”

“The filter will archive her emails, you won't even have to see them unless you look in the folder for them.” Castiel was still typing. “I'll find you a hotel room.”

Another expensive hotel where he didn't belong. “I can stay with Sam.”

“I insist.” Castiel stopped typing. “Dean, I never anticipated this response. I should have. It might be better for you to dissolve our agreement.”

Dean fought the sting that leapt in his chest. End this? No. “I'm not getting run off by some creepy emails.” He closed the browser and lay back, pillow under his head. “I don't scare that easy.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I mean, this is just a couple of months, it'll blow over.” His computer chimed, and Dean lifted his head. A flood of email alerts tiled up his computer screen. “Sonofabitch.”

“I'm afraid you need a new Google account,” Castiel said. “Do you want some help setting that up?”

Dean sat up. “Yeah. What do I do?”

***

Castiel looked at the last gift photograph Dean had sent. It was of Dean, reflected in a bathroom mirror, his face half shaven. Flecks of soap rested on his cheek. He tilted his head back, the razor
shaving a path through suds on his throat. He looked straight into the camera with flirty humor.

The reflection went low enough to show water droplets on his hairless chest and belly, low enough to hint at complete nakedness.

The caption read, “You'd have to touch it to believe it.”

Was that an invitation?

Castiel wondered all the way up to Vancouver, and the question distracted him even as he checked into his hotel. He imagined running his fingers along Dean's cheek and complimenting him on how smooth it was—in public. He wasn't going to cross the line again.

He waited for Dean outside, on the walkway that connected the hockey arena to the SkyTrain station. Lucas waited with him, smoking one of his stupid cigars, getting his smoke in Castiel's face.

Cas tried to move out of the way. “That's a filthy habit.”

Lucas rolled the cigar around in his mouth. “I haven't had one all week. Where's your handsome lad?”

“He said he was taking the train.”

“Oh, so that’s why we’re standing up here. I wouldn't have intuited that without your help, Castiel.” Lucas watched ash fall off the end of his smoke. “Will we see you glowing at brunch tomorrow?”

Castiel rolled his eyes. “You can't tell by looking at me whether I've had sex.”

“It's a certain leisure in your movements.” Lucas exhaled a cloud of smoke. “A little smile when you remember a moment, a wandering of the eyes as memory takes you back.”

Castiel tilted his head, but Lucas wasn't looking at him.

“You remember how his skin felt under your hands and your fingers flex. You sleep better because he's warm and close beside you. You breathe with him and feel his heartbeat and everywhere your skin touches his, you're connected, and he goes on touching you even after you're apart.”

Castiel stared. “That's an awfully poetic way to describe getting laid.”

Lucas drew on his cigar and smirked. “Brother, when have you ever gotten laid?”

Castiel scowled.

The doors of the train station opened. He watched for Dean among the navy hockey jerseys, logo-embroidered caps, and face paint.

Lucas sucked on his cigar and spoke again. “You don't get laid, Castiel. Maybe you should, but you've never worked that way. And right now you're wound up tight.”

“It's too early for that.”

Lucas sighed. More ash disintegrated in the breeze. “You're taking him to weddings. You're staying in perfectly good hotels. The ground won't swallow you up if you get your ya yas out.”
Castiel looked away. “It's not like that.”

“Then what's it like?”

“We're just--”

Dean walked out of the Skytrain station. All Castiel could see was his head but he knew Dean’s walk, how he held his shoulders, how he swung his arms. He wore the navy cashmere sweater Castiel had bought for him with the sleeves pushed up, his throat bare. Dark aviator glasses covered his eyes, and his hair was rumpled like he just got out of bed.

Castiel's heart leapt.

“Oh, brother,” Lucas said softly. “Look at you.”

Dean strolled up to Castiel wearing a big smile. He skimmed a smooth-shaven cheek against Castiel's skin before planting a kiss on his temple. He wore a scent heady with vetiver, spices, and a whiff of a nectar-sweet flower Castiel couldn't name without an hour in the crook of Dean's neck to figure it out. Castiel wanted to kiss him again.

He couldn't want that.

He kept his hands to himself, returning the kiss to Dean's cheek. “There you are.”

“I hope you didn't wait long.” He murmured it in Castiel's ear like it was a secret.

Castiel fought a shiver. “Not long.”

Dean shook Lucas's hand and dropped back to twine his fingers between Castiel's.

Lucas eyed the two of them. “Puck's going to drop soon. Let's get in before those coyotes eat everything.”

***

Dean held Castiel's hand as they moved through the crowds. He kept his attention unfocused and let people stare. Lucas asked him about the last time Dean had seen a game in the arena, and Dean shrugged. “Years ago.”

He used to sneak out and peek at the game for a few seconds before he had to go back to serving food and drinks to spectators in the executive suites. Now he was walking into a suite on the blue line. Ezekiel asked him what he was drinking and Dean said beer, and Zeke poured him one while Dean picked out some sushi and other tidbits to eat. Dean felt like a pretender sitting down as a customer in places he used to work.

Castiel glanced at Dean's plate. “You like sushi?”

“Yeah. No octopus, though. They're too smart to eat.”

“I live around the corner from a good place in Seattle. We'll go.”

“I usually go to little places here. Cheap, but not too cheap, you know? Like Momo.”

“I've never been.”

“We should go.” Maybe he could show Castiel his Vancouver. Four dollar crepe and coffee
breakfasts, Saturday nights at the observatory, dare him to come to Wreck Beach...

Maybe he wouldn't like it.

“I think I'd like that.” Castiel answered Dean's smile with one of his own.

“Next weekend?”

His smile faltered. “I can try.” Castiel looked regretful, like he wanted to go for cheap sushi in a little hole in the wall.

“I know you're busy.” That wasn’t how this worked. Castiel didn’t hire him to sit in cheap restaurants and look at stars. They’d date in Castiel’s world--arena suites, theater box seats. Five star restaurants. Luxury hotels.

Castiel held a tuna roll to Dean’s lips. “Maybe just before Zeke’s wedding? I was going to book the flight from Vancouver anyway.”

“Hey you two. The puck's going to drop.” Lucas waved them to the front of the suite.

Dean picked up his plate to join Lucas, and swerved when the man next to Ezekiel backed up and stumbled, one arm outflung for balance.

“You alright?” Dean asked, and then gawked. Joel Komarek bent over and adjusted the straps on his prosthetic. *Joel Komarek*. All time points leader for the Calgary Hitmen, first round draft pick to the Vancouver Canucks, Rookie of the Year. People said he had hands like Gretzky, and maybe that was true before the accident.

“All good, new model, I don't have the hang of the fastening.” He stood up, and thin strands of flaxen hair shone in the overhead light. “No. I hate this foot, and I'm never wearing it again. I'm Joel Komarek.”

“I know. I mean, I'm Dean Winchester.”

Joel waved him to the place opposite him at the table. “I've been waiting for you to come over and let me have a real look at you. So you cracked Castiel Novak, hmm? Good for you.”

Joel was prairie born and bred, and not even a million dollars a year could wipe the friendliness away. Dean forgot about the money it took to lease a suite as Joel kept up friendly chatter. They talked through half the game. Castiel sat beside him, a possessive hand on Dean's arm, or his knee.

“You’re cute together,” Joel announced. “How long has it been?”

Dean fed Cas the last strawberry from his plate. “This is our third date.”

“Really? He dragged you to a wedding this early?” Joel gave Castiel an exasperated look. “You threw him in the shark tank and he's hand feeding you. I think you'd better keep him.”

Castiel looped his arm around Dean's waist. “I'm dragging him to your wedding too, Joel.”

“I'm glad you're not settling for Dash LaCroix.”

Dean set down his beer. “Dash LaCroix? Dark hair, blue eyes, Batman called, he wants his jaw back?”

Joel laughed. “You met him.”
“You could say that. He hit on me at the reception.”

Castiel frowned. “He hit on you?”

Dean shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Michael was trying to fix Castiel up with him,” Joel said. “He hit on you? Did he not know you were Castiel's date?”

“Some guys are shameless.” Dean dropped his napkin on the table. “Clock's gonna run out, I'll be back.”

Castiel pointed toward the back. “The suite has its own restroom.”

He used to stock it with soap and toilet paper. “I want something from concession.”

“The server can get it for you.”

“Hailey's probably on break.” Dean popped a quick kiss on Castiel's cheek. “Back soon.”

He stood in line at the ice cream stand and chewed over what Joel had just said. Michael didn't like him, and Michael's friend hit on him, knowing who he attended the wedding with. Had it been a test?

He shrugged it off. Michael didn't really matter.

Castiel, though. Dean shuffled forward in the line. Castiel was interested. He touched Dean a lot, and angled his body in a way that looped the two of them together. He looked at Dean with a hungry air, like he was planning to give Dean another of those knee-melting kisses as soon as they wound up somewhere no one could see them.

Dean smiled to himself. That would be tonight.

He ordered a large malted ice cream, and wove through the crowd who waited for the end of the period to get up for another beer. He pushed the suite door open just in time to hear Castiel say, “It's too soon,” and then the table hushed as someone noticed he was back.

Too soon?

Dean pretended like he didn't hear and fed Castiel ice cream.

Dean had hardly seen the game at all, but everyone moved to the front seats for the third period. The Oilers forced a tie, but the Canucks won in overtime. Lucas slapped Castiel's shoulder, said “See you in the morning, brother,” and left, unwrapping a fat cigar. Joel gave Dean a big hug, let him go, and then reeled him back in to sniff his neck.

“Joel, give Dean back,” Ezekiel said.

Joel breathed in deep. “I will. In a minute. What cologne are you wearing?”

“It's a secret,” Dean said. “I hope Cas likes it.”

“I like it,” Castiel said. “But I don't remember all the details. I'll have to smell it again.”

Yes, please. Just like this. Dean turned his head to invite Castiel to take his time, and blinked.

Castiel glared at Joel's back, jaw set and eyebrows low. He reached out and tapped Joel's shoulder.
“Excuse me, Joel. I'd like him back now.”

Joel shot Dean a wink as he backed up. “Smell him, Castiel.”

“I plan to.”

Dean's blood rushed. He was going to wind up against a wall. Castiel wound one arm around his waist and pulled him in close.

“I'm hungry,” Joel said. “Grazing never does it for me. How about we--”

“How about you and I,” Ezekiel said. “I think these two want to be alone.”

He couldn't be suggesting that they—Dean looked at Castiel and smiled. “Do we?”

“We do. Goodnight.”

Joel flashed Dean one last wink as they left him and Castiel alone in the suite.

Dean faced Castiel, who still held him close. He let his fingers drift over the bulge of Castiel's shoulder. “I had a great time, Cas. We should go back to your hotel.”

Castiel's hand fell away. “What?”

Dean swallowed a bubble of embarrassment. “It's the third date.”

Castiel rubbed his lips. “Oh. It's the sex date.”

“I come with you, do the walk of shame in the morning, nobody needs to know what we really did,” Dean said. “Come on, it'll be fun.”
Champagne

They walked hand in hand under young blossoming trees. Castiel watched the traffic on his right and wished that he hadn't fallen to temptation, that he'd been more reserved. But from Dean's first kiss on his temple, the easy way he took Castiel's hand, every touch had been addictive. Castiel had eaten food from his fingers, sat with Dean's warmth outlining the left side of his body. He leaned against him and soaked in the nearness Dean gave without reservation.

There was so much comfort in resting his hand on another body, of being welcome and touched. He'd fallen into it to the point where his fists had curled up and heat kindled in the back of his skull when Joel flirted with *his* date.

He'd forgotten. He'd wanted to forget.

Dean rubbed the back of Castiel's hand with his thumb. The hairs on his arm stood up, eager for more of Dean's touch. Dean tilted his head, and Castiel tried to smile.

"It doesn't have to be the sex date." Dean's voice barely carried above the traffic. "We can have a drink, I can go home."

"My room only has one bed."

"Is there a couch?"

Castiel thought of the elegant settee in front of his room's flatscreen TV. "Too short to sleep on."

"Don't worry about it," Dean said. "We can do it next time."

Castiel wanted him to stay, even in the dangerous privacy of his hotel room. "You're right. It should be the sex date. I'll get some champagne."

They would just sleep. Castiel was a grown man and he controlled himself. He wanted a closer whiff of Dean's cologne. He bit down on the corner of his mouth and looked away.

"Whoa."

Castiel followed Dean's gaze to the corner. A photographer snapped picture after picture.

Castiel squeezed Dean's hand. "Pretend it isn't happening."

"It's because of this, isn't it." Dean lifted their clasped hands.

"I'd say we've generated some interest. There will be more, Dean. I'm sorry."

He looked past the photographer and into the distance. "I decided to be an actor, and I'm not in the closet. Did you stay at the Fairmont again?"

"The Rosewood."

Dean whistled. "Fancy."

They were going to do this. Half of him navigated the walk back to the hotel, and the other half dreamed of Dean under his hands, a feast of bare skin to touch and taste. He clenched his free hand into a fist and counted one, two, three, four, then flexed his fingers wide. He had to rein it in.
had an agreement.

He should say something. “Have you seen the--”

“Thank you for--”

They sucked their words back up.

“Go ahead,” they said together.

Dean laughed. “You first.”

“I was going to ask you if you'd seen the Cezanne exhibit,” Castiel nodded toward the art gallery. “But I don't even know if you like art.”

“I like photography,” Dean said. “I wish I was better at it.”

“The pictures you sent me were really good. Well lit, good composition--”

“Crop tool in GIMP,” Dean said.

“Well, of course. Good photography is good editing. What were you going to say?”

“Thank you for bringing me to the game. I had a good time, and Joel's a hoot.”

“Joel likes you.”

“He's a natural flirt, Cas.” Dean bumped his shoulder, and Castiel bumped back.

“I know.” Dean had noticed his—what was that? Whatever it was, he didn't have a right to it. Dean wasn't his boyfriend. It was a facade, a job. They were going to spend the night together, because they needed to look like the real thing.

Castiel ushered Dean through the lobby doors, slowing to let Dean take in the rosewood paneling, art deco style mouldings, and the long crystal chandelier. Dean touched the etched brass on the elevator walls. “This is really beautiful.”

“You've never been here?”

Dean shrugged. “Maybe I'll get a job here come summer. Is there a good restaurant?”

He wouldn't need to do that. “Would you like to try it?”

“It's probably closed by now.”

Castiel led the way to his door. Dean took off his shoes and crossed to the sitting room, eyeing the too-short settee while Castiel called room service. He hung up, and Dean lay on the narrow seats, his legs hooked over one arm of the sofa. He grinned up at Castiel. “I see what you mean.”

Castiel offered a hand and helped Dean to his feet. “I can take the couch.”

Dean glanced at the bed. “It's plenty big.”

It was wider than it was long, dressed in oyster and gold with black and white chevrons on the throw pillows. They could share it. Rumple the satiny duvet and scatter the pillows until they nested in the center in a warm tangle of skin on skin.
He had to stop thinking like that. He wasn't a teenager. But to have Dean so close would be agony.

Dean tilted his head, trying to catch Castiel's eye. “I don't want you to feel weird.”

“I could say the same for you.” Dean's cheek was still so smooth. Castiel reached up to touch it. “It doesn't have to be the sex date. But I'd like it to be.”

Dean's eyes widened. His mouth fell open. “Cas--”

Castiel dropped his hand back to his side. Damn it! “I meant that we should spend the night together, not that we should have sexual intercourse. I misspoke.”

Dean chuckled. “You caught me off-guard.”

Castiel backed up to answer the knock at the door, his face hot. He signed for the champagne and the cheese plate. He brought it to the side table where Dean stood and twisted the cork out of the bottle, pouring them each a glass. “You caught me off-guard too. Suggesting we come back here was a surprise.”

Dean took the glass from his hand. “You don't like surprises?”

Surprises were dangerous. “I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm a bit of a control freak.”

“You're not obnoxious about it.” Dean sipped his drink. “Oh, that's good.”

Castiel held up a square of sharp cheese and Dean ate from Castiel's hand. He could feed Dean an entire meal this way, bite by bite. “Drink.”

Dean smirked. “There you go again. Maybe you're a secret leather dom or something.”

Castiel laughed. “I'm not a secret leather dom.”

“Are you a secret leather sub?”

Was this something Dean was into? “No leather anywhere. I like to lead when I dance. I like to top in bed most of the time--”

Dean waggled his eyebrows. “Oh, most of the time?”

“Hush.”

Dean closed his mouth. Interesting. Castiel fed him another bit of cheese. “I always organized group projects. I directed school plays. I was AV club president. Dad wanted me to start at the bottom by coding a new website for the DVD rental service and I wrote the first version of NetWatch's streaming software instead.”

“That's a lot of pressure, Cas.” Dean touched his cheek, fingertips stroking against his skin. “Don't you ever let go, let someone else take care of you?”

Castiel closed his eyes. “I work. I keep busy. There's always something that needs to be done.”

“Do you take time for you?” Dean persisted. “Book a massage, something like that?”

He hadn't. “It's hard to carve out the time.”

“You need it. I should bring my table down to Seattle for Lucas's wedding. But I could give you a
head massage tonight.”

Dean's fingers in his hair, pressing firm, melty circles into his scalp. Relaxing him to near sleep before touching him everywhere...oh, if he could let Dean touch him like that. He poured out more champagne for both of them. “You know massage therapy?”

Dean nodded. “I got my license a few years ago. Turned out it wasn't a good idea.”

“Not actually flexible enough for your acting jobs?”

Dean's jaw tightened. He watched the bubbles rising in his glass. “I got a lot of offers for bonus activities.”

The image of Dean's oil slippery hands stroking Castiel's penis disintegrated. “I'm sorry. Healing touch ought to be respected.”

Dean gave him a soft smile. “I kinda get it. I was younger then, and I looked...well honestly I was a bit of a twink.”

He had a picture. “I bet you were adorable.”

Dean snorted. “Sure, because I'm all haggard and old now.”

“You're beautiful, Dean.”

Dean's tongue peeked out, just touching his top lip. His mouth would taste like Perrier-Jouët.

He smiled, his eyes soft. “So are you.”

Castiel leaned closer. Dean's eyelids lowered and his mouth opened. Irresistible.

Dean stayed still and let Cas kiss him, his mouth silky and soft. His cashmere sweater was velvety under Castiel's touch, warmth radiating from his back. Castiel slipped his hand under the sweater's hem, hungry for Dean's skin. Dean shivered, another tiny moan escaping his throat.

The noise ghosted over Castiel's skin, waking him up. Dean's glass clacked on the sideboard, and he found Castiel's, taking the flute away from him. He grabbed Dean with his free hand, spreading his fingers across the back of Dean's neck. Glass struck the tabletop and shattered, the noise in tune with Dean's ragged breath.

Castiel led them away from the broken flute and Dean followed, as sure-footed in this dance as he was in a waltz. They crossed the interlocked circles printed on the carpet, Dean's fingers firm on his shoulders, breathless from kiss after kiss after kiss. Castiel was stone hard, his cock throbbing almost painfully. Dean pressed against him, rubbing his own erection alongside Castiel's.

Oh, God. Yes. Yes. He squeezed Dean's ass in both hands, pulling him close. He bit Dean's lips and the noise he made shot down Castiel's spine and they were on the bed, Dean's hips riding up into Castiel's crotch. He was going to come like this. Needed to, oh fuck yes. And then again. Again. He was going to make Dean beg.

Dean gasped for breath, his hands pushing against Castiel's hips. “Cas. We gotta stop for a sec.”

What the fuck was he doing?

Castiel rolled off Dean, his flight checked by Dean grabbing him, pulling him back.
“I’m sorry, Dean. I’ve overstepped again.” What the fuck was wrong with him?

“Don’t be sorry.” Dean caressed his cheek. His cheeks were rosy, his throat pink. Did he blush everywhere? Castiel wanted to see. “I never brought anything with me, condoms or lube or gloves, because I’m an idiot. Did you?”

Castiel bit his lip. “Only lube.”

Dean let out a breath. “Okay. So there’s a drugstore on Granville and if I run my ass off I can make it. Am I running to that drugstore or not?”

Castiel sucked in a breath. They could make their sham sex date real. He could peel Dean out of those close fitting jeans and--

No, no. “I can’t.”

“Okay.” Dean sat up and dragged his fingers through his hair. “So do I go home, or do we figure out what’s okay and what’s not? Because if it’s okay, I want to fall asleep in this bed with you.”

“And nothing else? Just sleep?”

The smile Dean wore was half at himself. “I’d like to borrow your bathroom for a few minutes. I’m pretty wound up.”

Castiel had wound him up. God, they’d been dry-humping like a couple of kids. He'd need a turn in the bathroom after Dean was done. But Dean wanted to sleep in Castiel's bed, to lie next to him in the dark.

Maybe that wasn’t such a good idea.

Castiel pushed himself off the bed. “Stay. I have a t-shirt for you.”

Dean closed the doors to the bathroom. Castiel stood still and listened for the slightest sound. Water rained down from the shower, and a few minutes later Dean walked out in black boxer briefs, Castiel's cotton t-shirt, and a brazen grin. “Better.”

Castiel laughed. “My turn. See you in a few minutes.”

***

The t-shirt Cas lent him had a d20 on the chest with the 1 at the top and a legend that read, “This is how I roll.” Dean grinned at it. Cas was a gamer? Or used to be a gamer, and remembered it fondly. He looked back at the closed bathroom door, where water fell like rain from the luxurious shower heads in the stone tiled bathroom. It looked like it belonged in a magazine. The whole place did. Everything was perfect, from the spray of white orchids next to the window to the stationery set centered on the room’s writing desk.

Dean picked up the chevron-patterned blanket he and Cas had shoved off the bed. Well. Almost everything was perfect. The duvet lay rumpled where he had Cas had fallen on the bed, where Dean had taken Castiel’s weight on his body and--Fuck, Castiel was a beast once he got going, sweeping Dean along as they rubbed their bodies together and kissed like they would die without it.

Dean could have kept his mouth shut. They had both done STD testing. Asking for condoms was a check, and Castiel had rolled off him apologizing. That wasn't yes. Dean wanted yes or the whole
game was off, even if that makeout session was shaping up to be the hottest lay he'd had in years.

But the way Castiel had said, “I can't” wound a cold thread through Dean. He could have said a dozen other things to say no. “I can't” prickled Dean's instincts. Something deep stopped Castiel. It wasn't just being busy.

And the reasons why weren't really his business. He didn't have the right to worry about Castiel, but fuck, what happened to him?

Dean peeled back the blankets and slipped between smooth, cool sheets. Maybe they could just cuddle a bit and watch something on the big TV, fall asleep like it was no big deal, because Cas wasn't paying him to get curious about Castiel's issues. Even if it felt personal.

Cas came out bare-chested and Dean sucked his lower lip between his teeth. Damn. He was so hot. Muscular, covered in a light dusting of dark curled hair that fuzzed over his pecs and the bumps of his abdomen. Fucking hell. Running and yoga did this? Bullshit.

“If you keep looking at me like that...”

Dean dragged his lip out from between his teeth. “Sorry, but you're kind of a hunk.” What would he look like naked? Did he have a fuzzy butt? That would be so cute. Dean lifted the blankets, and Castiel got into bed beside him, smelling like his expensive sandalwood body wash. Dean kept to his side of the bed, tucking one hand under his cheek.

Cas smirked. “Are we going to lie here and stare at each other all night? Come here.”

Dean rolled over, fitting into Castiel's body like a spoon. “This is good.”

“Mm.” Castiel wrapped his arm around Dean and pulled him close. “Now I get to figure out what you smell like.”

His beard stubble scratched Dean's neck. Dean bared more of his throat for Castiel's curiosity. “This one's my favorite.”

“I think it's mine too. Save this one for special occasions.” Warm lips pressed on the beat of his pulse and traveled toward his ear.

Dean hummed. That was good. So nice. “If you get at my ears we're gonna be in trouble.”

“More trouble than we've got now?”

Yes, please. “Tons more.”

Castiel lifted his head away. The air on his neck was cool and lonesome. “You make me want to be bad.”

Now that they lay with three items of clothing between them and Castiel was warm and sexy, Dean hesitated. “I don't understand why you don't date, Cas.”

He went still. “You want to know?”

“You don't have to tell me, but I'm curious. You're hot. You're nice. Tons of guys would want you. But you don't have to tell me.”

Castiel's hand traveled down Dean's side. “There's just no room.”
“Yeah, your busy life. But you're kinda doing it,” Dean said. “I mean here we are in bed together.”

Castiel spread his fingers over Dean's hip. “Yes. We are.”

Oh God, that voice in his ear made him want to grind back against Cas’s dick. “You could be with someone you wanted. Dating sucks, I'll warn you right now. But you could find somebody. If you wanted to.”

Castiel stayed silent but words perched inside him, ready to brim over.

Dean wove his fingers through Castiel's and waited.

“I had a boyfriend years ago,” Castiel whispered. “We were going to run away to Canada and get married.”

A hollow ache grew in his chest. “What happened?”

Silence. Silence.

“He died.”

“Oh, Cas.” Now it all made sense—a perfect, terrible sense. “You must have loved him very much.”

“He was my life.”

Dean closed his eyes. Dad was right. _You never stop, _he told Dean once. _You never forget._

“It still hurts, doesn't it.”

“I had to work. I had to stay busy, keep moving.”

“And your family thinks you should be ready to move on. But you're not.”

Castiel slid his fingers across Dean’s palm, wound their fingers together. “How can you know this?”

“My mother died when I was little. It was an accident. My dad—he fell apart. He didn't know how to live without her. It took him years to get it halfway figured out.”

“Did he?”

Castiel propped himself up on one elbow. Dean turned onto his back. Castiel watched him, eyes hooded. He held his breath.

Dean wanted to tell him yes so badly. “Sort of. He married again.” And Kate was wonderful, but she wasn't Mom.

“And is he happy?”

“He's...”

The light in Castiel's eyes dimmed.

Dean rushed on. “He's happy, Cas. He's got a nice little house and a woodworking shop. He goes hunting every year, fishing all the time, he quit drinking, he straightened his life out. He loves
Kate. But he'll never forget Mom, never love anyone like that again. I get it. I grew up with it."

“You didn't have to tell me that.”

Dean smiled up at him. “Well, while we're here in the dark...you can say all kinds of things you'd never let past your teeth in daylight.”

Dean let the truth settle into his bones. Castiel couldn't love him.

That was a relief. Dean would be gone in two months, and he didn't have to worry about Castiel feeling too much for him.

Dean was safe. He could follow this exciting feeling and not have to worry about anyone getting hurt.

***

Castiel opened his eyes to Dean snuggled up against him, sighing in his sleep and rubbing his gorgeous ass against Castiel's morning hard-on. Cas ached to let himself give in to that. He murmured something sleepy and cute when Castiel got out of bed to shower. Dean was awake when he came out, towel wrapped around his waist.

“I'm meeting Lucas for brunch. Do you want to come?”

“I should get home.” Dean fell back on the bed and pulled his jeans on, legs in the air. “I have to pack and get a couple things done. Maybe we can eat lunch in Seattle or something. I'm not sure when I'll come in, it depends on when the buses are running.”

“I'll send you a car in the morning.”

Dean gave him that brilliant smile. “Sold.”

Castiel called downstairs to arrange for the hotel's car service to take Dean home. Dean had balked at riding home in the hotel's vintage Bentley, but Castiel silenced every protest with a kiss and a repeat of, “Get in the car, Dean.” It had taken seven before Dean ran out of reasons.

He'd never met anyone so uncomfortable with luxury. It was strange. There wasn't anything wrong with enjoying nice things. Perhaps Dean just wasn't used to it.

The pictures of him kissing Dean by the Bentley were on the internet on Monday. Netwatchangel had captioned them Walk of Shame and some of the comments made Castiel wonder if he should go wash or start a to-do list. Some of those fans were creative. The vignette about Dean's fingers crumpling the bedsheets as he chanted fuck was particularly vivid. He let that one dance in his head as he drove to the north end of Seattle to go climbing with Ezekiel.

Chalk dust, sweat, and concrete mingled in his nose and helped him focus. He hurried to where Ezekiel waited, next to the wall with the gnarly reverse angle. “Sorry I'm late.”

Ezekiel smirked. “Walk of Shame, huh.”

“Shut up.” He crammed his feet into tight-fitting turquoise climbing shoes, double checked his harness, threw paper and won the lead climb.

It was just him and the wall now, and he followed differently colored grips up forty feet, deciding which looked interesting but not crazy.
“What do you think?” Ezekiel's voice sounded behind him and through his bluetooth headset.

He adjusted the volume, scowling as he remembered the chalk on his hands. “Purple.”

“You feeling lucky today, Cas?”

Castiel shrugged. Purple was difficult, but it wasn't as hard as pink. “I want a couple dynos. On belay?”

“Belay on. Ready to climb?”

“Climbing.”

Castiel put a toe on the first hold, boosting himself to the first sloper. Distractions fell away. It was him and the wall, forty feet of holds and ledges to test his strength and his judgement. The next hold was big. Nice and juggy, but he'd have to jump for it. He kept his eyes on the grip, got his weight low, and pushed off. He flew free of the wall for an instant of freedom. He caught the hold and found his toehold, smiling. He could have wound up on the floor, but his risk paid off. “Hard part's over.”

Zeke scoffed. “You're five feet off the ground.”

“That was a good jump and you know it.”

“Poetry in motion, Cas. But the climb's not over yet.”

Castiel hooked his belay line into a carabiner sunk into the wall. “Clipping. I see two more jumps before the reverse.”

“Castiel.”

“Hm?” He put his heel on a purple hold and pushed for the next grab.

“You spent the night together.”

Castiel sighed. “And that's your business how?”

“You said you weren't going to entangle yourself.”

“I haven't. Everything's fine.” Castiel reached for a tiny grip, crimping his fingers to get more force.

“Cas, listen to me.” Zeke made a frustrated noise. “Joel likes him.”

After pawing him and huffing Dean's cologne? Castiel laughed. “I know.”

Left or right? Castiel looked ahead, planning his next moves. Left. He spidered up the wall, using his legs to make the reach.

“You know how he is. Joel will continue to be friends with him after you break up.”

“That's fine,” Castiel said. “I like Dean.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. He's very kind. Slack?”
Ezekiel played out some rope. “And he's good at his job.”

“He is.” Castiel used the slack to scramble up a few holds and stood on a sloper. His hands were slick. He reached behind him, dusting his fingers in chalk. Joel could like Dean. Cas was going to swamp him with work in Hollywood. They'd maybe see each other twice a year.

“Really good at his job,” Ezekiel persisted. “Right down to the way he looks at you when you can't see him.”

Castiel swallowed. No. That was just... just lust. Natural attraction. Ezekiel was reading too much into it.

“It's funny,” Ezekiel's voice was a gnat in his ear. “You look at him the same way. Are you acting too, Castiel?”

No. That wasn't happening. It had been a long time. Dean was hot. And Castiel wasn't made of stone. “Relax. There's nothing going on between us.”

“If you say so.”

There was no other way to take this crux. He had to leap for it. “I told him about Ennis.”

“You what?”

Castiel flew free of the wall. He grinned as his fingers closed on the hold. He put his right palm on the wall, but his knee crashed into the big hold on the pink route. Pain made his fingers clench. He had to hang on.

He couldn't fall. He wouldn't. His legs swung free and he hung from one hand, thirty-odd feet in the air.

“You okay up there?” Ezekiel gathered all the slack. “You need a wobble?”

“I'm good. I'm still on sight, I got it.”

“You can fall, I've got you.”

Castiel gritted his teeth. “I've got it.”

“Okay, okay. You told him?”

“Yeah. What's the big deal?”

Ezekiel didn't say anything.

He looked down. Eyes on the wall. There. He lifted his leg, planted his foot on the purple hold and stood up on it. “I don't know what you have against him.”

“I don't have anything against Dean. I think what you're doing is going to hurt you both.”

“How can it? We know what we're doing.”

“No one is that good of an actor, Castiel.”

“We're not--”
“And you're not an actor at all. Where is he?”

Castiel concentrated on the next hold. “I don't know.”

“He's here in Seattle,” Ezekiel said. “I followed his Instagram. What's he doing here?”

“It's not what you think.”

“Oh really? And what do I think?”

Castiel stretched for the final hold. “Route sent?”

“Route sent,” Ezekiel agreed. “Don’t change the subject.”

“I'm coming down.” Castiel set his feet on the wall and walked his way down. Ezekiel let out the line slowly.

“Castiel.”

“Margaret is sending him email. I wanted him to meet with Inias.”

Ezekiel stopped radiating disapproval. “How bad?”

He landed on the padded floor and unhooked his harness. “No direct threats. But creepy. I checked him into the W.”

“Okay. Just one thing.”

Castiel looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “What.”

Ezekiel unhooked his belay line. “Joel's never seen you with anyone the way you were with Dean at the game, Cas.” Ezekiel looked him in the eye and went on. “But I have.”

Castiel licked his lips and looked away.
Castiel had sent a car, as promised, but couldn’t he use Budget like everyone else?

A British racing green F-type waited for him at the end of his walkway, top down and gleaming. Dean pressed the keyfob, and the car chirruped in response. It was really his rental.

Son of a bitch.

Half an hour later he adjusted the soft leather seat, closed the automatic convertible roof, and set the climate control. His music player shuffled as he pulled out of the parallel space and onto the pebbly gray street and Jesus it leapt under the barest press of the gas. He would face a ticket if he didn't rein it in.

The speakers pulsed with the clap-and-kick beat of a well-loved song. Dean tapped out the rhythm on the steering wheel, singing along at full volume. It was a song about limerence, the vocalist both eager and afraid to know if his feelings were returned. His player kept it up, feeding him songs of longing and desire one after another down the hundred and fifty rain-drenched miles to Seattle.

He was hunting for a parking spot when his phone rang. He answered it through the car speakers. “Sam?”


Dean rolled his eyes. “Business. Cas has fans.”

Papers riffled on Sam's end of the line. “I saw the picture of you two kissing. Nice car.”

Dean winced and parked the Jaguar. “Nothing happened. We drank champagne and ate stinky cheese.”

“And then you slept.” Sam's voice was selling ten pounds of skepticism for a penny.

“He told me why he made the arrangement, Sam.”

Paper clattered, hundreds of pages tapped on their edge. “Why did he?”

He cut the engine and stuck his earbuds in. “He was in love, but the guy died, and he's not over it.”

Paper noises stopped. “Like Dad?”

“Cas turned to work instead of drinking.” Was that true? Cas drank, but he didn't dig his way into a bottle the way Dad used to. “That's why he's so busy.”

“How long's it been?”

Dean wove through a knot of tourists taking pictures of the Pike Place Starbucks and got into line. “Seven years.”

“Dean,” Sam said. “That's how long it was when Dad met Kate.”

That was a coincidence. It didn't mean anything. “This isn't that.”
“Right. It's business,” Sam said. “Have you broken the agreement yet about physical contact?”

“Come on, it only says that we don't have to pretend when we're not in public.” Dean glanced hurriedly around. No one looked at him. “It doesn't say we have to keep three feet of space between us at all times.”

“Dean—where are you staying tonight?”

Dean knew what expression Sam was wearing right now: the muley one, with his jaw slung forward and his nostrils pinched up. “Sam, everything's fine. There's nothing going on.”

“But you're in Seattle. Are you spending the night here?”

“I want you to meet Cas. Let's go for burgers and hang out.”

“You're dodging my question.” Slide of a filing cabinet drawer opening, thumping shut.

“He booked me a hotel. A fancy one.”

“And now you want me to meet the boss.”

Dean rolled his eyes and shuffled up the line, smiling at the cashier. “Cafe Americano, with room. Sam, he's a nice guy. But if you can't handle it, fine.”

“I can handle it—fine. Come by. We'll go for burgers. Do you have any business to talk about?”

Talking about castielslady would take too long. He hovered his charge card over the reader and found fifty cents to drop in the jar. “Not really. But I have a meeting at the office tomorrow.”

“What kind of meeting?”

Dean winced. “Dealing with fans and stuff. We'll see you tonight.”

***

Dean hadn't arrived at the office. There were pictures of him outside the Pike Market Starbucks on his Instagram, and another selfie shot from the top of the ferris wheel. Castiel had cleared his afternoon when he saw the first picture, and now he had nothing to do but read scripts from the slushpile. There wasn't anything good. His phone beeped out an alert, signaling that castielslady had sent Dean another email.

Now he would see if he was right. Dean had posted a picture of himself next to the gum wall, pulling an awful face.

Castiel's throat tightened. She was stalking his Instagram account, the only social media Dean seemed to use.

He checked his email, and found the expected message:

_I know what you are and I know why you're crawling all over him like a cheap whore._

If he'd known she carried this much anger...Her blog posts weren't like this. They were childishly innocent, set in mossy rainforests or picturesque bridges over babbling brooks. When it was just wish-fulfilment fiction, it was okay. Creepy, weirdly objectifying, but okay. But she was enraged by Dean and it was his fault. He had to keep Dean safe.
What could he do? Restraining orders meant telling her exactly where he lived, where he worked out, what clubs he belonged to. Inias would lose his hair.

His phone made that hated beep again. He checked on Dean first, and he had posted a picture of himself sitting on the nose of a British racing green Jaguar with a big grin. The caption read, “Relax, it's a rental. Thx to Jerry for taking the picture.”

Castielslady's email read, *I can't wait to see you ruined like you deserve. Everyone will know.*

The email came a minute after the picture.

He wrote a text with his heart in his mouth, but he kept it casual. *Hey. You're in Seattle.*

Dean's reply chimed almost immediately. **You saw the pics? I'm actually at Bop Street Records, my Instagram is two hours behind.**

His breath rushed from him in one hard sigh. Two hours behind. He knew better than post them until he was long gone. *You collect records?*

**I'm actually being a searcher robot for my roommate.**

He had no idea what was happening. *I can duck out of work any time. Will you come to the office? I have something you should see.*

**Sure. I was just killing time until I could check in at the hotel.**

He wouldn't post pictures of his hotel would he? Or someone else might take a picture of him. What was castielslady capable of? He wished he knew.

But he did know where Dean could stay that was safer than a hotel. Majel might be the smartest home in Belltown.

Let Dean in his home? He'd never let anyone stay there. Dean in his personal space. Using his bathroom. Drinking coffee on the roof. Controlling the remote in the TV room--

Sleeping in his bed.

Castiel was on his feet and in front of his window in a few strides. That's what he really wanted. He could admit it, even if his principles had crumbled. Someone below stepped out of the building and opened a green umbrella, a bright octagon in a meadow of black. Was he using this as an excuse?

His phone beeped again, and Castiel startled away from the window.

*You're nothing, and you'll have nothing. Not him, not his fame, not his money, not his love.*

Dean's photograph was of him in front of the troll under the bridge.

He swiped on his phone and sent a text. *How soon can you come to the office? Something's come up.*

**I just left the store,** came Dean's reply. **I'll be there in a few minutes.**

***

*Something's come up* had to be one of the worst phrases in the English language. It churned Dean's stomach as he drove a car that he couldn't even buy after he got paid for this fake boyfriend gig.
What had come up? Did Castiel want to call it off?

Dean used the parking garage below Castiel's office, driving deeper and deeper underground. His mouth was dry. He'd do about anything for some water, but did he have time?

He was going to call it off. That's what was happening here. Castiel had changed his mind.

Ava met him by the floral arrangement in the lobby. This time it was birds of paradise, glossy philodendron leaves, and pale green orchids. She smiled at him but that didn't mean anything. She was a professional.

Castiel waited for him on one of the plum sofas, but he stood up when Dean came in the room. Castiel dressed for work was sharp as a razor. He wore a waistcoat and trousers of a steel gray three piece suit coupled with a lilac shirt and violet tie, shiny wing-tipped shoes. He made Dean's jeans and leather jacket look scruffy.

A pitcher of icewater rested on the coffee table, sweating with condensation.

He looked at Dean with relief. “You're here.” He took both of Dean's hands. “I noticed something today. You need to know about it.”

“Okay. Can I have some of that water?”

It had been infused with cucumber and mint. It was delicious, so cold, clean like it had been filtered through charcoal. Dean drank half a glass before he even glanced at Castiel’s tablet, showing him castielslady’s emails and how they timed with his Instagram posts.

“When you said something had come up, this is what you meant?” Dean asked.

Castiel cocked his head. “What did you think I meant?”

Dean shrugged. “Could have been anything. So what does this mean?”

“She's keeping tabs on you. I think you should stop posting on Instagram until Inias can advise you.”

“Because it's setting her off?” Dean asked.

“Yes.”

Dean shrugged. “So what? What's she going to do?”

“I have no idea,” Castiel said. “But—are you frightened?”

Dean had been scared, but some fan wasn't even on the list of things he'd tied his stomach into knots over. “No. Should I be?”

Castiel closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Dean, do you know how Selena died?”

What was this? “I'm going to guess. A fan killed her?”

“Same thing with John Lennon. If you were killed because you were dating me...”

Castiel was afraid. That's what was happening. Castiel was afraid for him. “Okay. So I'll stop posting to Instagram. What else should I do?”
“I’m concerned about your safety, staying at a hotel.”

“I’ll go to Sam’s. No problem.”

“Does Sam’s building have 24 hour security?”

Dean laughed. “They prop the front door open with a brick.”

“No. I can't let anything happen to you.” Castiel's fingers dug into Dean's arms. His jaw clenched tight. Dean's heart tripped in his chest. What was he so afraid of?

“Okay. What's the safest thing for me to do, Cas?”

“Stay with me.”

Whoa. In a minute. In a heartbeat. But-- “At your place?”

“I've got 24 hour security on my building, and programmed my home system myself.”

“Do you have two beds?”

“No. But the couch is a nap trap.” Castiel glanced away. “It's not appropriate.”

“I'll stay with you.”

Castiel looked back. “Really?”

“You said, it's safest. And to the outside world, it makes sense we would do that, if the sex was good.” Dean cracked a smile. “And it was really good.” Castiel on top of him kissing him senseless and grinding on him was the hottest memory he'd taken to bed in years, so that was even true.

Castiel's smile was slow. “Was it?”

“Yeah. I mean that's why I hauled ass down to Seattle, isn't it? Because we can't get enough of each other and you want me in your bed.”

Castiel's eyes widened slightly. His lower lip fell away from his teeth. Heat rose up Dean's chest and flared on his face. Castiel's stare made him want to back up a step while praying that Cas would chase him, and he'd wind up colliding with--

Dean's heel hit the couch.

Cas caught him in his arms.

“That part's true.” Every place Castiel touched him glowed. Dean kept his face turned away, but Castiel's lips were right on his ear, breath and lips whispering. “But it's up to you.”

Fuck. Shivers raced down his back. He stood still, his eyes half shut. Yes. Yes, fuck, do it right here, Dean was ready, he was down--

Two sharp raps on the door had Dean half toppling over the couch trying to leap away from Castiel, who just held on tight. He lifted his lips away from Dean's ear. “Zeke.”

Oh, shit.

Ezekiel stood just inside the door, lips pressed together. “I appear to be interrupting.”
“Yes,” Castiel agreed. “But what is it?”

He stepped inside. “I was coming to tell you that I put together an audition date for Grace.”

“Here or Vancouver?”

“Here.”

“Great. Email me the details.”

“Castiel.” Ezekiel folded his arms.

“Zeke, you're still interrupting,” Castiel said.

Ezekiel sighed. “Should we go for dinner and talk about this?”

“There's nothing to talk about,” Castiel said. “Close the door on your way out, Zeke.”

Ezekiel balked, but finally shook his head and went out. The door clicked shut, and Castiel let him go. “I'm sorry. No one is used to the idea that I might want some privacy in my office.”

Dean's face burned. “That was awkward.”

“Quite.” But Castiel's lips twitched, and the corners of his eyes crinkled.

“He's going to ride you about it the next chance he gets,” Dean said. “You okay with that?”

“I can handle Zeke.” Castiel shrugged it off. “He mentioned dinner. That's a good idea.”

“Oh. Yeah. I kinda booked us,” Dean said. “I told Sam we'd drag him off for burgers.”

“You want me to meet your brother, or your lawyer?” Castiel cocked his head.

“My brother. I can cancel, if you'd rather not--”

“I'd be happy to meet him, Dean.”

“Okay.” Sam would see that there was nothing to worry about. “I figured we'd go to L'il Woody's, it's my favorite in Seattle. Have you tried it?”

Castiel looked away. His shoulders rose a little higher. “I've never been there.”

“You don't like burgers?”

“No, I do.” Castiel's smile was a bit strained. “I'd like to try it.”

“We've got a two car situation.”

“Leave the rental here. We'll figure it out later.”

Castiel slipped his jacket on and he was way too classy for a meal served on waxed paper. “Where does your brother live?”

“Capitol Hill.”
“Fun neighborhood,” Castiel said. “Traffic from here to there is hell.”

Castiel drove an ocean blue Tesla that ran quiet as a whisper. Castiel handled the car with ease, weaving through traffic a little to gain a little more time. The huge screen displayed navigation, advising where to avoid congested traffic and roadwork.

“This car is spooky quiet,” Dean said. “I'm used to big engines.”

“I thought you didn't have a car?”

“I do. Only she's 48 years old and my insurance is for limited driving. I'm not even sure I can take her over the border.”

Castiel glanced at him, head tilted.


“So it's a muscle car?”

Dean shook his head. “Muscle cars have two doors. Mine's got four.”

The Tesla was an amazing real-time navigator but parking took a while to find. Once on the street Castiel walked fast, staring straight ahead with a forbidding scowl.

“Hey. It's just my brother,” Dean said. “It'll be okay.”

Castiel slowed down. “He knows about us.”

“Well, he's my lawyer.”

“Did he bill you for that contract negotiation?”

Dean scoffed. “Of course not.”

Castiel made a face. “He ought to bill you.”

“We trade. He reads my contracts, I do his housework, run his errands, grocery shop, stock his freezer with heatable meals. Besides, I covered for him when he took off to see Nine Inch Nails when he was 16 and Dad told him he couldn't go.”

“He'll owe you for that forever.”

Dean turned onto the cement walkway leading to Sam's apartment building, a squat red brick tenement with white painted windows. Castiel made a sour face at the propped open front door. Dean led the way over stairs that echoed like kick drums, up all three flights to the first door on the right. He knocked and tried the knob, twisting the door open. Moist air billowed out of the bathroom, scented with minty soap.

“Sammy? You naked?”

The scrape of his bedroom's barn door rolling closed answered that question. Dean glanced over his shoulder. “Guess so.”

Castiel smirked.
Dean wove around Sam's bicycle, nudged his saddlebags aside with his foot, and led Cas around the corner to the space that served as Sam's living room. Sam had left the table folded open, taking up half the standing space.

Dean scooped up bowls, cups, and silverware. He walked them into the kitchen, where more unwashed dishes rested. “Ah. Sam has a hectic schedule.”

“He's a first year associate, right? You said he was twenty-five.”

“Twenty-six in the beginning of May.” He should have just met up at the burger joint. It wasn't like there was a tower of filth, but the apartment was tiny. The walls were landlord white. There were posters tacked on the wall, all the furniture was secondhand. This was a long way down from Teslas, executive offices, and luxury hotels.

No. Fuck it. He and Sam had come up from nothing. They'd risen above drifting from state to state, living in motels and even sleeping in the car, when Dad couldn't work or gamble his way into a roof over their heads. Sam was a lawyer who billed at $325 an hour, saving every cent for his first house. He lifted his chin and eyed Castiel.

“Not what you're used to, is it.”

Castiel shrugged. “It doesn't have to be.”

The barn door slid open and Sam came out wearing a t-shirt with a pennyfarthing on his chest. He pointed at Dean. “Don't you dare wash my dishes.”

Dean stepped away from the faucet. “If not me, then who? Sam, this is Castiel. Cas, Sam.”

Castiel took Sam's offered hand. “How do you do?”

“This is the part where I'm supposed to say, 'break my brother's heart and I will end you.' If this thing you two have going was actually real.”

Dean set a dirty pot down on the counter. Sam wasn't smiling. Neither was Castiel.

“I would expect no less.”

Sam's eyes widened, but he nodded. “So long as we understand each other.”

That wasn't what it looked like. It wasn't.

Castiel regarded Sam with all seriousness. “I think we do.”

This was too much. “Come on, stop. We're all behind the curtain here, cut that out.”

Both of them flashed him quelling looks, but Castiel eased up. “I found your revisions to the contract excellent, Sam. You have a clear way of writing one doesn't often see in legal documents. How much time did it take?”

Sam shrugged. “Couple hours. I was surprised you signed off on all of it.”

“It was all reasonable. Do you have a lot of experience in entertainment and IP law?”

Sam cocked his head. “Did you read the contract?”

Castiel smiled. “I wrote the contract.”
Sam's eyebrows went straight up. “I thought you were a comp sci guy.”

“Bachelors in Computer Science, then law school. What was your undergrad?”

“Rhetoric, Stanford University.”

“Sammy can read Latin,” Dean said. “Who does that?”

Sam laughed. “So you took a weird turn in school?”

“Not at all. I wanted to do both. But you. Let me guess. You're aiming for trial work.”

“You got me,” Sam said. “I have to claw my way out of scut work first.”

Dean watched it all with a warm ache. They got on so well. They'd nearly forgotten he was there.

“Dean told me you never billed him for your contract revisions.”

Sam picked up dishes and set them on the counter. “He's my brother.”

“I know, but bill him anyway. It's a legitimate expense, so it won't cost him a thing.”

The front door creaked as it swung open. “I let Hope steal my surgery,” Jess called, “so you better be ready for love.”

“Hey Jess,” Dean called.

“Dean?” Shoes thumped on the wooden floor. “Dean, I love you. Like a brother. But you have to quit being a cockblock.” Jess skidded into the living room in sock feet, eyes widening when she saw Castiel.

“Jess, this is Castiel Novak. Cas, Jessica Moore.”

“How do you do?”

Jess ducked her head with a pained smile. “Awkward.”

“I'll be getting him out of your hair after dinner,” Castiel said. “Dean had mentioned Li'l Woody's? I've never been there.”

“Seriously?” Jess gestured at everyone to come along. “We have to fix this. Right now, let's go.”

Castiel let Sam and Jess lead the way along Pine Street, wearing a stare that went right through other people. Dean squeezed Castiel's hand, and Cas gave him a little smile.

“Okay?”

“Sure,” Castiel said.

He hung back and didn't look at anyone, studying the menu printed on panels mounted on bright orange walls.

“The Pig and The Fig,” Dean said. “It's really good.”

Castiel nodded. “Do you mind if we sit upstairs there, in the loft?”

“Sure. Jess, steal our table. I know what you want.”
Castiel told Dean what he wanted and then looked at the walls again. What was up with him? He'd checked out. The place was clean and cheerful, but was there something wrong? The cashier rang up the order and Cas paid, adding a big tip to the total. He took the receipt and retreated up the stairs, leaving Dean to stare after him.

Their favorite table was the one in the very back corner, and Dean climbed the stairs just in time to hear Castiel ask, “Jess, do you mind if I sit in the corner?”

Jess gave up her seat without protest, and Castiel sat down. “You mentioned letting someone steal your surgery.”

Jess looked up from her phone. “That's right. I'm a resident at Harborview. It's a lot of hours.”

“What's your specialty?”

“Cardiothoracic.” She grimaced at something on her phone. “Sorry. I got a late RSVP. They were supposed to be all in a couple weeks ago. Are you coming to the wedding? Dean already said no plus one but we're eating barbecue beef on a bun, so it's no problem.”

Sam gave Dean a wide-eyed look.

“I asked him,” Dean said. “Maybe he can keep me from ruining your wedding.”

Castiel offered Dean a seat. “How were you going to do that?”

“My bet was pass out in the wrong tent,” Sam said.

“Drunken Broadway showtunes,” Dean added.

“Breaking my maid of honor's heart.”

“Come on.” Dean ducked his head. “Ashley's got a boyfriend, anyway.”

Castiel covered Dean's hand with his. “So do you.”

Dean went still. He stared up at Castiel, who squeezed his hand. He—was performing for Jess. Oh, right. She didn't know.

Dean let the smile grow like a sunrise. “Yeah, I do.”

Castiel's answering smile was soft. If they were alone they'd be kissing right now.

If they had been alone, Castiel would never have said it.

Dean didn't let his smile falter. He ducked his head. It had felt real, for a minute. He had to watch that.

“Oh my God,” Jess crowed. “You toppled Mount Winchester. I have never seen him go stupidfaced over anyone.”

“Shush.” Dean grinned again. He rested his hand on Castiel's thigh and avoided Sam's gaze by looking bashful and pleased.

Castiel kissed the corner of his forehead and smiled. “God, you're cute like this.”

“You stop too.”
Jess did a little shoulder roll in her seat. “Dean's got a boooyfriend.”

Their burgers arrived in plastic baskets lined in red and white paper. Dean stole a dip of Sam's little cup of vanilla milkshake, and waited for Castiel to take a bite of his burger, grinning when he closed his eyes.

“It's good, right?”

“This makes me very happy.”

Dean picked up his own and bit into tart-sweet pickled fig and crisp bacon, catching a taste of sharp Gorgonzola cheese. Castiel had another bite.

“Mm. Mm! Oh, God.”

“Is it a spiritual experience or is it sex?” Jess shot Dean a sly glance.

“It's--” Castiel swallowed and went on. “Definitely a carnal pleasure.”

Sam's mouth opened in amused outrage. “Did you just--”

Castiel winked and took another bite, bumping Dean's knee under the table. Dean gave him a fond look and stole his milkshake. “So. You like it?”

“I love it. Where else do you go for burgers?”

“There's a place on Davie in Vancouver that I really like.”

“Let's go there,” Castiel said.

“Mr. Novak?”

Castiel froze.

A blond woman in a twinset and a hairband stood next to their table. An employee? Then she beamed at Dean, and Dean tried to smile and chew at the same time. “And you're Dean Winchester, oh my God. This is amazing!”

Oh. A fan.

Castiel set his burger down, tense enough to bolt—if the woman hadn't been between him and the exit. He tried a closed-mouth smile as he chewed on his burger, caught with his mouth full.

“Thank you,” Dean said, and she pressed one hand over her heart.

“I'm a big fan, Mr. Novak, and I'm so excited for Grosvenor Lane. I just love period drama.” She fumbled a cell phone out of her purse. “Could I--”

Sam pushed his chair back, the scraping sound catching the blond woman's attention. “Listen, uh—what's your name?”

“Becky Rosen.”

“Becky,” Sam said. “I'm going to be a bit rude. We were having a meal, and you interrupted us.” Becky's face fell. “I'm sorry. I just couldn't believe it, and I'm such a big fan—”
“I appreciate that,” Sam said. “But we’re eating.”

Becky shuffled her feet, tucking her phone back in her bag. “I shouldn't have interrupted. I'll go--”

“Wait,” Dean said.

She blinked. Dean took his own phone out. “I've never had a fan sighting before, Becky. Can I take a selfie with you?”

Her face lit up. “Really?”

“Really. Come on, I'll put it on my Instagram.”

He shouldn’t. But to hell with castielslady, seriously. He got out of his seat and wrapped one arm around Becky's shoulders, holding the phone out. “Ready?”

They cheesed for the camera and Becky gave him a hug. “I'll let you eat.”

“Thanks, Becky.” Dean turned on the smile and she went to her table smiling from ear to ear.

“You can't let them step over boundaries like that, Dean,” Sam scolded. “Shit, you were trying to eat dinner.”

“Bah. Two minutes, she goes away happy.” Dean stole more of Sam's milkshake dip for his fries. “It's less creepy than being photographed from fifty feet away.”

Castiel picked up a fry, looked at it, and tossed it back in the basket. “It's over now. Jess. You mentioned a late acceptance to the wedding?”

“Yeah. I invited her even though I thought she wouldn't come.”

“So it's twice the inconvenience,” Castiel observed.

“Meg and I were roommates in first year. I still talk to her on Facebook,” Jess shrugged. “One more won't hurt, and she knows she needs to bring a tent.”

“We're going cheap,” Sam said. “Jess's parents have acres of land, and if it rains, we'll use the barn.”

“But it won't rain,” Jess said. “I'm having the perfect wedding.”

“Reminds me, Ashley and I have to find time to plan your pre-wedding party,” Dean retrieved his phone and sent her a text. “I’ll be here all week so we might as well do it.”

Castiel nodded, and he smiled, but he flicked glances at everyone who came upstairs to eat.

Dean wiped his mouth and squeezed Castiel's hand. “We should probably get going.”

“Yes,” Sam said. “You should check into your hotel before they decide you're not coming.”

“Yeah. It's getting late.” Dean gave Jess a shoulder squeezing hug and took Castiel's hand as they walked out the door.
“So that thing with Becky,” Dean said, once they were out on the street. “Freaked you out, didn't it.”

“It's not a big deal.” Castiel pressed his lips together and let his face settle back into an unwelcoming frown. The car wasn't far. They could make it. “You were really nice to her.”

Dean shrugged. “She was embarrassed. I wanted to make her feel better.”

“Other fans will expect that you'll take selfies with them too.”

“So it was a mistake?”

“It depends on what you want. Interaction with fans is tricky.”

Dean nodded. “That's why you've never been to Li'l Woody's. Or any other burger joint in town.”

“I go out.” It wasn't like he was a hermit. Castiel had a social life. “Some spaces are more insulated against such meetings.”

“Expensive places, you mean.” Dean got in the car and waited until Castiel was buckling his seatbelt to go on. “And what if that had been castielslady?”

There was a gap in traffic. Cas put the Tesla's nose in it, and the Camry behind slowed to let him in. “I knew it wasn't. She doesn't look anything like Becky Rosen.”

He cut across lanes to turn left onto a single lane road flanked by bike lanes and slender saplings.

“But they all freak you out.”

Castiel's shoulders sagged. “They do. I shouldn't even be a celebrity. I'm not an actor.”

“You're handsome, young, rich, and single,” Dean pointed out. “Also mysterious. That's accidentally the best media game in town.”

Castiel let a reflector-covered cyclist clear the intersection before he turned onto Bell Street. “It's not a game. It just turned out that way.”

Dean covered Castiel's knee. “I'm just saying. Your circumstances make you a good story.”

But not a big story, thank God. The plot twist with Dean hadn't prompted any digging.

Yet. “I just wish they'd focus on someone else.”

“You could become less interesting,” Dean mused. “Get married or a long-term boyfriend, get poor, or get old, and they'll go away.”

“None of those are going to work. Well. Getting old will, eventually.”

Dean looked out the window. “Yeah.”

They passed under Alaskan Way and turned into the alley. Castiel waved his keycard and the garage door opened. “All the locks are electronic. I have extra cards.”
Dean wheeled his suitcase to the elevator, and they stopped to have Dean photographed and registered as Castiel's guest.

Dean watched the elevator floor lights on the way up. “You weren't kidding about the security.”

“You need an account with Majel,” Castiel said. “Give me your phone. I'll work on it while you get registered.”

He reached for the doorknob and walked in. “Hello, Majel.”

“Hello, Castiel. You have no messages. Welcome home.”

Dean's eyes popped. “Your apartment talks?”

“Voice activated commands.” Castiel dropped the keys to the Tesla in a hand-thrown clay bowl. They clattered on Castiel's second-favorite fountain pen, small change, and a thumb drive shaped like the Millennium Falcon. Dean stood in the room that only family had ever been inside. He touched the leather tub chairs, smiled at the twin computer stations.

“This is the room where people who pick me up stand around and wait. That's a Mac, that's a dual boot Windows/Linux machine. The kitchen's over here.”

Castiel led the way with a quiver in his stomach. Dean was in his space, and it was too late to change his mind. Dean followed, suitcase wheels click-grumbling on the black and white tiles.

“Holy.” Dean stroked the green countertop. “Glass? Nice. How do you like that grill on your range top?”

Castiel shrugged. “I don't cook.”

Dean's jaw dropped. “Are you kidding me?”

He toed an inch wide black tile. “I make a killer espresso. I'll pour you a latte that will make you cry.”

“I'm already crying,” Dean said. “A kitchen like this and you only use the coffee maker.”

“It's an espresso machine.”

Dean waved the distinction away and turned around. “Why no furniture in your living room?”

Castiel's quivering stomach heaved.

The empty room was two stories of exposed brick walls and ten foot tall sea-green framed windows. A twisted staircase led up to the loft, and the old pine floor lay wax-polished and bare. Watching Dean take it in hurt, tore at the hollow place in his chest.

They hadn't decided on furniture.

“I should probably hire a decorator.” The lie was sour in his mouth.

Dean nodded, but his mouth was a straight, firm line. “It's a tough call, isn't it? You don't have a dining room, so maybe you should have a table on this end, maybe a living room slash library on this side—” He shook his head. “How long have you lived here?”

“You didn't tell Sam you were staying here.”
It was Dean's turn to look at the floor. “He doesn't need to know.”

“So. I'm a secret?”

Dean gave him a sharp look. “I didn't notice you giving Ezekiel all the details.”

“He's your brother.”

Dean looked up at the slow-turning ceiling fans. “What exactly would you suggest I tell him, Cas? That I'm shacking up with you because one of your fans wants you to play Misty for her?”

“He doesn't know why you're here?”

Dean shrugged. “I told him I was here for media training.”

“Why didn't you tell him the truth?”

“Because he'd want me to stop. He already doesn't like the idea. If he knew about that—if he knew about...this...” He pointed from Castiel to himself, and scowled. “Whatever. How about you show me the rest of your place. Which is pretty cool so far.”

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Dean looked back as they climbed the stairs. That empty room should have been the heart of Castiel's home. There should be memories in the cushion dents, personality and taste on display. Instead it was a peculiar blankness, a place where nothing was allowed to grow.

Castiel veered to the left at the top of the stairs. “This is my home theater. Game consoles are in the cabinet.”

A black and white chevron carpet covered the floor. An oxblood leather sofa could seat five, no problem, with one end extended into a lounge.

“It's the Black Lodge from Twin Peaks.”

Castiel nodded. “That was my inspiration. Bedroom's over here.”

Castiel made a u-turn into the next room and laid Dean's suit bag on the foot of a wide, low bed draped in dark blues and grays. He opened a closed door and waved Dean in. “You can use the right half.”

It was a dream closet: tidy, organized with shoe racks, dresser drawers, closet rails at varying heights. The far wall bore a floor to ceiling mirror and a fold out ironing board with a clothes steamer. The left side held a parade of shirts sorted by color, each garment perfectly aligned and spaced.

The right hand side was completely empty.

“Thanks.” Dean looked back at Castiel, who had his face turned away. “Uh, where's the bathroom?”

“This way.”

Castiel led him into a blue and silver tiled room. There was an antique claw tub, refinished and gleaming. A walk in rainfall shower occupied the back wall, along with a toilet and a bidet. Twin sinks lined the wall opposite the tub, the left sink surrounded by grooming stuff.
The right hand sink was bare.

“You can--”

“Use the right sink, yeah.”

Castiel backed out of the room and closed the door. Dean turned the faucets on the right hand sink. They were stiff to open, but water flowed, cool but warming up fast.

Castiel didn’t allow closet creep to take over the whole space. God knows the last time this sink ran water. They were the hollow spaces Castiel wouldn't fill, but he'd given them to Dean as if they didn't matter.

That was bullshit.

Dean turned the water off and stepped outside. Castiel leaned against the floating wall. “I'll root your phone and put Majel's software on it. Do you have anything you need to back up?”

Dean clutched his phone, a terrified twinge flashing through his middle. “What if you break it?”

Castiel gave him a lopsided smile. “I'll buy you a new one.”

Yeah he could do that, couldn't he? Dean handed his phone over. “Okay.”

Castiel poked the screen. “While I'm doing this, you can talk to Majel so she can learn your voice, and unpack your things?”

“Sure. Sounds good.” Dean took a step toward the bedroom. “What do I do?”

“Hello, Majel.”

“Hello, Castiel. How can I help?”

“Majel, setup guest level A account for Dean Winchester.”

“Hello, Dean. Welcome to your voice recognition interview. Please begin by telling me a bit about yourself.” Majel had a clear voice, with none of the weird pauses and unfortunate inflection of most speech simulators. Did he use a voice actor?

Dean glanced at Castiel, who nodded at him to go ahead. “I'm Dean Winchester.” Duh. She knew that. “I’m twenty nine years old. I live in Vancouver—well Burnaby really, that's right next door. This is the first time I've talked to a house, and it feels a bit weird.”

Castiel wandered away. Dean picked up his suit bag and took it to the closet. He peered at the right side of the closet and its fixtures, looking for smudges, dents, and scrapes.

“What is your mother's maiden name?”

“Campbell.”

He hung his suits and fought an uneasy shiver. He wasn't an invader. Castiel had told him to use it. Castiel had invited him to stay in his apartment. He looked back at the heap of pillows and the inky blue duvet and his heart tripped in his chest.

“What is your favorite food?” Majel asked.
“It’s a tie. Cheeseburgers and pie.”

“What foods do you hate?”

“Low fat sugar free diet anything.”

Dean unrolled ties and sorted them by color and pattern. He’d brought too many for the luxury of choice. *We can't get enough of each other and you want me in your bed.*

He'd been joking.

Dean looked over his shoulder again.

“What foods do you hate?”

“Low fat sugar free diet anything.”

Dean unrolled ties and sorted them by color and pattern. He’d brought too many for the luxury of choice. *We can't get enough of each other and you want me in your bed.*

He'd been joking.

Dean looked over his shoulder again.

“Do you have any allergies?”

“I’m allergic to cats.”

“That is a very great pity. How warm do you like your bath or shower?”

“Hot but not scalding.”

“Do you take your coffee with cream or sugar?”

“I drink it black.”

Dean took his toiletry bag to the bathroom, and Majel followed him. “Do you prefer to wake up to alarm sounds or music?”

“Music.”

“Please name the song you would like to play for your personal alarm.”

“D’you have any David Bowie?”

“Yes. The collection is complete.”

“Well, that narrows it down,” Dean grumbled to himself. “Play the full album of *Heathen*.”

He laid out the shaving kit Castiel had bought for him and his fingers closed on a smaller zip bag. He held it on his palm and considered it.

The time to pretend that he wouldn't need this kit was long past. It belonged in the night table on “his” side of the bed. Which side was that? He tossed it in the air and the condom wrappers crinkled as he caught it one handed and returned to the bedroom.

Castiel sat on the edge of the bed with Dean's phone in his hand.

Dean hid the case behind his back.

Castiel's eyebrows rose.

“Is your cell phone registered on my network?” Majel asked.

Castiel nodded, intent on Dean's hidden hand.

“Yes.”
“Please activate the PADD application on your phone.”

Castiel tapped the screen and then pointed at Dean's hidden hand.

He should not want to sink into the floor. This was ridiculous.

“Your voice is now imprinted,” Majel said. “If you need me for anything, simply say 'Hello, Majel,' and I will answer. If you need to end a session, you may say, 'Goodbye, Majel.' Please remember that I am not an artificial intelligence, though I am quite clever.”

“Can you open the pod bay doors?”

“I'm sorry, Dean. I'm afraid I can't do that.”

“Son of a bitch,” Dean laughed. “Goodbye, Majel.”

“Goodbye, Dean.”

Castiel folded his arms. “So. What's in the case?”

***

He didn't really need to ask. Condoms, lube, maybe gloves, and other things that would fit in a packet as long as Dean's hand. The things Dean had asked for on the night of the sex date, even though they were both clear on their tests.


Castiel reached for the tie knot at his throat, undoing the handwoven silk with deliberate care. “Be prepared?”

Dean stood in the doorway and smirked. “You never know.”

Castiel pulled the tie out from under his collar with one hand and undid the button at his throat. Dean's tongue peeked out and touched the sweet, bowed curve of his upper lip. Castiel itched to trace that line with his fingers, watch Dean's lips part, feel his breath come faster. He wanted to see Dean's face as he put his hand over Dean's chest, to feel his heart race.

Stop. Stop. He looped the tie in one hand and held out Dean's phone. “All finished.”

Electricity tingled along Castiel's fingers where Dean's hand brushed his.

“Thank you, Cas.” Dean wasn't wearing the captivating scent of Saturday night, but something lighter, fresh with lime and ginger. Castiel breathed deep, drawing the scent up into his mind and memory.

Castiel drew back. “You smell good. You must spend a fortune on fragrances.”

“Less than you might think,” Dean said. “You one of those early to bed early to rise types?”

“I get up at five AM.”

Dean made a face. “No thanks. I'll catch up to you at the office. Is there time to watch a movie before we go to sleep?”
“Enough time to watch an episode of *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries.*”

Dean perked up. “It's a date. Give me ten minutes.”

Dean handed him his safe sex kit and returned to the bathroom.

Castiel chuckled. He unzipped the case and sorted through all the packets wedged around the vibrator and the magenta-purple labeled bottle of Astroglide. Dean wanted to use these things with him. He closed his eyes and shivered. The packets crinkled as he squeezed tingling fingers on the pouch's zipper and closed it.

Water pattered in the shower. Castiel should do that too. He slipped the pouch in his bedside table, next to his notebook and pens. The downstairs bathroom wasn't as luxurious, but it had a shower and a tiny sauna Castiel liked to use after a run through winter rain. He unbuttoned his shirt, tugging the tails out as he walked into the closet.

Dean had followed Castiel's organization when he hung up his clothes, everything sorted by color. His sparse collection was tidy, tasteful, and--

He could see it in his mind, this collection steadily growing. The shoe racks filling up. Storage boxes for off-season clothes, stacked on the high shelf until it was time to change every spring and autumn. The top of the dresser's little compartments, filled with watches, cuff links, a sprinkling of coins from trouser pockets.

He'd never imagined that closet would be anything but empty.

The vision pierced his heart as it changed. The spectrum of soft colors became dark, jewel toned hues, all the strong colors Ennis liked, paired with one tweed suit after another. None of those things had ever rested here, but he could see how they would have.

Castiel's throat went raw. Tears prickled in his eyes. Ennis.

He’d forgotten. What kind of man was he? Bringing Dean here, wanting him? Putting him in Ennis’s place—what was he doing?

The water shut off. Castiel grabbed his robe off the hook. He picked out sleeping clothes and left the bedroom, nearly colliding with Dean in the hall. One of the blue towels rode on his hips. His wet hair shed droplets of water on his shoulders and they rolled down clean, warm skin.

“Hey,” Dean said. “Your turn—what's wrong?”

Castiel stepped aside. “I'm fine.”

“No. You're not,” Dean said. “It's hitting you weird, isn't it.”

“I'll be fine.”

Water shimmied down his chest as he shrugged. “Okay. You wanna watch TV?”

“Sure. Yes. Just let me—give me ten minutes.” He circled around Dean and took a deep breath of the warm, misty air of the bathroom, shutting the door between them.

***

Should they have snacks? Dean opened up cupboards, searching for something to munch while they watched. He found a box of microwave popcorn and set a bag to popping, standing over it to
stop the power before it burned.

He glanced at the empty living room and pursed his mouth. The tall, wide windows let in too much light to match the feeling he got when he confronted the bare floor and blank columns of bricks. This room wasn't locked. He wasn't forbidden to look inside it. But there was still something that made him think of a secret locked up in the dreary house of a brooding Gothic hero.

The air took on a hint of popcorn tipping from cooking to burnt. Dean stopped the microwave, letting the last kernels to explode in peace. The water continued to rain down upstairs. Castiel's fridge was empty of anything but condiments and a bottle of chardonnay.

He brought up the bottle and a pair of glasses with the popcorn bag clenched in his teeth. The water stopped, and Castiel came out a few minutes later, wet-haired and pink from the hot water.

“Hey.” Dean pointed at the bottle. “Were you saving that?”

“Go ahead and open it,” Castiel said. “It's been sitting in the fridge since Easter.”

“Oh, was this the white they served at Michael's wedding?” Dean gave the label another look. “This is one to remember.”

“So you've never seen Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries?” Castiel sat down with a foot of space between them and navigated through the TV's menus.

“I wish I had more time to watch television.” Dean poured a glass and handed it over. “But my shift at work ate up a lot of my day. I've heard of it though. 1929, right?”

“Yes. Sets and costumes are really well done. I have a lot of TV on my system. Majel can import your to-watch list if you want to do that.”

“Handy.”

Dean put the bag of popcorn between them and settled back to watch the cold open.

Good-time jazz music played for the opening credits, and Dean reached in the bag for another handful.

“Do you think you'll like it?” Castiel asked.

“American television could do with trusting the viewer that way.” Dean waved at the screen. “She's a maid, she's dismissed because the owner of the house who was just murdered knocked her up, the maid in uniform is sweet but naive, and the fired maid is going to get an abortion. Not bad for a minute of TV and two lines.”

Castiel grinned. “You like it.”

“I love the way they tied the fired maid and the owner together with the parallel shots—She didn't kill him, did she? But she's the reason he's dead...” Dean trailed off. “Sorry.”

“Don't be sorry,” Castiel said. “You watch TV the way I do.”

“The guys yell at me when we watch stuff together,” Dean laughed. “Not Chuck. He writes TV scripts, so he gets it.”

“Joel refuses to watch television with me and Zeke. He says we suck the joy out of it.”
“But this is fun,” Dean protested. “Seeing all the work that goes into it, that’s important.”

“You love television,” Castiel said. “You don’t just want to be an actor. You love all of it.”

“Yeah.” Dean reached for another handful. “Days on set are some of the best days of my life. Shh, it’s starting.”

They ran out of popcorn before Miss Fisher bamboozled Hugh into letting her into the bathroom crime scene, and Castiel refilled their glasses after shoving the bag aside. He snuck glances at Dean and wondered what he thought of *The Baseball Cards*. What he would think of *Grosvenor Lane*. He wanted to watch Hitchcock with Dean, dissect *Hannibal* with him, make movie night a regular, sacred date. Dean took his wineglass from Castiel with a little smile and sipped, holding the glass on his right knee while his left rested in the space between their thighs.

“This is great,” Dean murmured. “Photography, costumes...so detailed.”

Castiel let his hand fall to the cushions next to Dean’s. “What would you think of being in a show like this?”

Dean smirked. “I know you're developing a historical series.”

“Am I really that transparent?”

“I study production schedules. I live with a lighting tech. We know these things.” An inch separated their little fingers. “I think it would be great. A lot of research to do, getting the historical context and all that--”

“That's a good habit.”

Dean laughed and spread his fingers. “I'm idealizing. I'd have to get a role that required more than just a little brainstorming to come up with the rest of the iceberg.”

“The lines being the part of the iceberg you can see.” Castiel covered Dean's hand.

“Exactly. I ask myself why, and discard at least the first two reasons that come to mind, because those are the easy choices...you've heard this before.”

“So what would you do with a man of military age with severe nearsightedness whose mother fought tooth and nail to keep him from going to war?”

“Take out my contact lenses.”

Castiel shot him a sidewise glance. “You're nearsighted?”

“Oh yeah,” Dean chuckled. “I got contacts the second I was able. My old ones made my eyes look tiny.”

“I'm trying to picture you in glasses.” Castiel’s thumb stroked over Dean’s wrist. That should not be so distracting, but raw tingles rippled from his touch.

“I need to take my contacts out before I go to bed, so you can see me in glasses. Should we watch another episode?”

“Did you like that one?”

“ Heck yes. Good on Dot for using the telephone. I told you she'd go far.”
“Take your contacts out, and we'll watch another.”

***

There was still half a bottle of wine to finish. Castiel poured refills and queued up the second episode. Casting Dean as Justin went against the plan. He meant to send Dean to Hollywood, not tuck him in with a series regular role that would keep him in contact. Zeke would disapprove.

Why did Zeke dislike him? He insisted that he didn't, but if he did, why did he keep warning Castiel that this arrangement with Dean wouldn't go according to plan?

Castiel laughed at himself and drank his wine. The plan got crumpled up and tossed out the moment Castiel kissed Dean the night of Michael's wedding. And Dean taking out his contact lenses in Castiel's bathroom--

The door to said bathroom opened, and Dean returned, a pair of silver-framed oval spectacles perched on his nose. They were the ones he'd worn in the picture of him nerded up in the gray sweater.

He was delightful.

“I like them,” Castiel said.

“Because they're high index.” Dean held his fingers a small distance apart. “I'm serious, lenses this thick. I can't see a foot in front of my face without them.”

“Let me see.” Castiel held out his hands, and Dean sat down, pulling the glasses off. Castiel put them on and the room warped, making him feel a little ill. “Wow. You can't see anything.”

“I can see you,” Dean said. “And you look cute in my glasses.”

Castiel smiled. “I used to wear them.”

“Laser?” Dean hooked the glasses back on his ears. “I've thought about it.”

“You could. It takes about three days to recover.”

Dean shrugged. “I guess I could. But you were asking me about a character?”

Castiel handed Dean his glass. “Justin is 27 years old. Unmarried. The owner of a local cannery. His mother is a bit of a nightmare.”

“Only child?”

“Yes.”

Dean thought. “Did any of his siblings live?”

Castiel stared. “How did you know--”

“1915,” Dean pointed out. “Not really a lot of contraception in those days. A high infant mortality rate, plenty of dangerous diseases—He's the only surviving son. The only inheritor. The line dies with him, but he can't make time with a girl because his mother doesn't want to let him go.”

Castiel nodded. “What do you think?”
“He resents her. But that's way down underneath. He loves her, of course, she's his mother, and he does have duty and responsibility to keep running the cannery and to take care of his mother, but what he really wants is to fly. Which she would never let him do. Is there a girl he likes, or a girl who likes him?”

Castiel leaned back. “He meets a girl. At the cannery.”

“Ah. Class differences.” Dean winked. “Mother won't like that.”

Castiel smirked. “My mother thinks you're great.”

“I like her too,” Dean said. “Justin's mother, though. She won't stand for it, will she? She'll do something awful.”

Castiel could do this half the night, feeding Dean character ideas and watch as his imagination made them breathe and live. Dean would be terrific as Justin--better looking than Castiel had originally imagined, but he'd carry Justin’s burdens and his longing and yes, the resentment that would lead him to betray the secret of Grosvenor Lane. “You could write this yourself.”

“I couldn't. I just like characters. I like their lives, I like their secrets, I like the reasons they get up and do whatever it is they do...” Dean drank some more wine and propped his elbow on the back of the couch. “Justin needs a secret. A big one. Secret baby?”

“He's a virgin.”

Dean sucked on his teeth. “Somebody died and it's his fault.”

Castiel raised his eyebrows. “That's possible.”

“I can feel it taking shape. That's not good. I can't fill in so many blanks without a script.”

Castiel grinned. “Do you want one?”

Dean pursed his lips. “Are you curious, or is this for a job?”

“I'd have to let Zeke decide. But I'd let you read the entire script.”

Dean shifted in his seat, flicking a glance toward the TV screen. “I'm curious, but you don't need to cast me.”

“Why would you turn it down?”

Dean shrugged. “I couldn't help feeling like I didn't earn it. Or worse, that I earned it the wrong way.”

“Ah,” Castiel said. “Bonus activities?”

“That's not—this--” Dean pointed at himself, then at Castiel, and then back. “The deal's off right now. We're in private.”

“We are,” Castiel agreed. “I'd like to see what you could do with an audition.”

Dean teetered on the decision, shoulders high. He didn't want to take advantage. But it wasn't. Dean had a gift.

Castiel stroked Dean’s shoulder. “How can I make it so it won't nag on your conscience?”
Dean sipped his wine, reaching for a second to think. “You’re right. Leave it to Zeke. He says yes or no, no hard feelings.”

“Done. I won't even be there when he has you read.” But he would drop the scripts on Dean's account on the network, and he'd watch the recording afterward. Just to see.

“Thanks, Cas.” Dean drank the last of his wine. Castiel tried to sip from an empty glass. “Guess we forgot about the next episode.”

“We did,” Castiel said. “Do you want to go to bed?”

“I'm gonna sleep in here tonight.” Dean patted the back of the couch.

Castiel let out a huge breath. “You sure?”

“Yeah. But you can kiss me goodnight--” he held his hands up. “Just a kiss. We get carried away every time.”

Just a kiss. Castiel leaned closer. Dean caught his hands, held them tight.

They kissed. Slow, light as feathers. Soft. Dean let his hands go and they pushed closer, arms around each other's shoulders. Castiel kept his hands on Dean's shoulders, keeping the limits of just a kiss. It felt soft and warm, prompting Castiel to relax into Dean's arms around him.

Just a kiss, Dean said. But it felt like they touched more than lips and bodies. He wanted to lie next to Dean again, soft and close.

Dean pulled back and straightened his glasses. “Goodnight, Cas.”
Birdsong warbled Dean awake. Soft leather lay warm underneath him, black and white zigzags on the floor--Castiel’s place, in dim, barely there light. Movement shuffled in the other room. Castiel didn’t linger in bed once his alarm went off.

“Majel. Start the shower. One hundred degrees.”

Dean didn’t have to get up, and this couch was even more comfortable than his bed. He stretched all the way down to his toes and listened to the water running in the bathroom. Maybe an early start, make some breakfast while Cas was out jogging along the waterfront.

The water stopped, and Castiel walked past the open doorway wearing nothing but a pair of shorts, and that split second woke Dean up faster than a shot of espresso. This was yoga day.

The short pile carpet was soft as merino under his bare feet. Maybe it was merino. Hundred year old pine floors were silent as he moved to the loft railing. Castiel worked through a smooth asana, movements flowing from one pose to the next. He stood in the middle of the empty room, facing the three green-silled windows on the south wall, palms pressed together to raise over his head before he moved into a lunge that spread his arms wide. Dean knew that one. It was the warrior pose, and the soft morning light caressed muscular shoulders and the wide flare of his torso. His face in profile was serene, his wet hair curling its way out of carefully combed lines.

He was gorgeous and strong. Focused, but peaceful. Castiel pivoted, shifted, and one hand touched the floor at his foot while the other pointed to the sky. Dean wanted to be down there too, stretching with Castiel as if it was something they could do together.

But doing yoga together in private wasn’t in their contract. That was a friend thing. A partner thing. Castiel didn’t hire Dean to be his workout buddy.

Castiel flowed through pose after pose. He balanced on his hands, legs extended, and slowly lowered his feet to the ground, standing upright once more. He turned his face up to the loft where Dean stood.

“Good morning, Dean. I hope you slept well.”

“The birdsong woke me up.”

“I’ll decrease the volume. My apologies.”

“I watched you do your yoga thing,” Dean said. Stupid. He knew that.

“I know. I might have done a little showing off with those last poses. Do you know yoga?”

Dean shrugged. “I’ve done some. I dated a yoga instructor for a bit.” A weekend was a bit. Wasn’t it?

“If you’d like to learn, I can schedule you with my personal trainer. Think about it.” Castiel climbed the curving stairs up to the loft, pausing in front of Dean. “It’s very beneficial.”

“Thanks. I’d like to try it.”

“We can trade,” Castiel’s smile was a bit uncertain. “If you’ll help me with dancing, I’ll help you
“Yeah. That’d be great. Hey. I’m up anyway, how about I make breakfast?”

“There’s nothing to eat. But I’ll pour you a latte if you’re staying up? And there’s a place around the corner called the Bang Bang cafe, they do breakfast burritos.”

“Latte sounds good.”

“I have to get dressed,” Castiel said. “I have a meeting at 7:00 am.”

“Wow. You better move.”

Castiel went into his room but left the door open. “Since you set your alarm for 7:45 I made a 9:00 am appointment for you to meet Inias.”

“Okay. I’m getting in the shower.”

The scent of espresso hung in the air when Dean got out. Castiel was dressed in a close-fitting navy waistcoat, peach shirt, and coral tie. His jacket hung outside the kitchen as he drained a tall cup of espresso and steamed milk. Another sat on a matching saucer, the foam on top patterned with a heart.

“I’m running late,” Castiel said. “Majel can schedule your car service, just let her know.”

“See you at lunch?”

“I'm not sure I can get away for lunch, but I'm going to try.” Castiel slipped his jacket on, fastening the buttons. He stepped back into the kitchen, and dropped a kiss on Dean’s cheek. “See me after you’re done with Inias.”

He sailed out the door, leaving Dean staring after him.

***

Dean picked out his taupe suit, pairing it with an olive green tie and a cream shirt. He had a breakfast burrito and a second cup at the cafe Castiel had mentioned, and walked back to Castiel’s building in time to meet the car. Dean looked out the window while the driver wound through the labyrinth of one way streets and pedestrian traffic, talking to someone on his headset in Polish.

Ava waited for him in the lobby. “Mr. Winchester.”

“Dean, please.”

“Dean. I’ll take you to meet Inias. Come with me, please.”

Dean had been expecting a wall of muscle in a suit, but the head of security was of average height and build, his blue eyes set close together in a narrow, solemn face.

“Good morning, Mr. Winchester.” Inias nodded and sat down. “Castiel asked me to give you security training. He’s quite concerned with Margaret Masters’ behavior.”

“Right. So what do we do, get a restraining order?”

Inias shook his head. “We don't actually want to do that. Right now, you're just a face on the internet. Not responding is the safest tactic.”
“Ignore her, and she'll go away?”

“Yes. Here's a picture of her.”

Inias produced a pair of photographs of a woman with wavy, dark hair and round cheeks. She dressed casually, anonymous in khaki trousers and a knit collared golf shirt in one, a white blouse and black skirt in another.

Dean laid them side by side. She turned her face slightly away from the camera to get the more flattering three quarter profile in both pictures. Candid photos would reveal more of her character.

“She lives in Portland,” Inias said. “We can't invade her privacy, but we know she doesn't really leave town. She's a clinical researcher in pharmaceuticals. She works long hours. She lives alone, has no pets, doesn't really socialize much. She travels by bicycle.”

Dean looked up from the inadequate photographs. “That means I'm not likely to run into her in Seattle or Vancouver, right?”

“That doesn't mean you should dismiss this. I'm going to ask you something pretty personal. Have you ever been hurt or imperiled by another person?”

Dean pressed his lips shut. His stomach clenched.

“You have.” Inias leaned back. “Close call?”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “You know in your gut that something isn't right.”

Inias relaxed. “You trust your instincts.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “I don't know if Castiel told you what I do. I'm a waiter. Well. To pay the bills.”

“Yes.”

“And you hustle tips. That means adjusting your behavior to what the customers want. So yeah, I have to watch out for myself.”

Inias cocked his head. “Sexual harassment?”

Dean nodded. “Creeps eat too. You figure out how to stay out of the way.”

“You're ahead of a lot of the men I advise. You don't deny your intuition. If you start to feel uneasy, listen to it.”

Inias cut Dean loose at 11:30. He tried to figure out where Castiel's office was but he got lost in the hallways and open offices. He found a staff kitchen and grabbed a packet of cashews, nibbling on them as he found the same open office space for the third time. He tried another corridor that didn't look familiar, reading the names on the doors. No Novaks. This was a thicket of middle management.

A big man with curly blond hair stepped out of an office. “Dean.”

“Lucas.”

He smiled. “You sure?”
Dean smirked. “Michael probably has a tan right now, and he doesn't smile as much as you do.”

Lucas laughed. “My twin brother has a stick up his ass. Castiel too, honestly.”

“Cas is just very focused.”

Lucas put out his hand and Dean poured him some cashews. “He's pretty focused on you.”

Dean shrugged and smiled. “I was trying to find his office, but I got turned around.”

“You sure did,” Lucas popped a cashew in his mouth. “Come on.”

Lucas led the way to the other side of the building. He knocked, but opened the door before anyone answered it or said “come in.” Dean flushed a little. It could have been Castiel’s brothers instead of Ezekiel walking in on them.

“Look who I found, brother.”

Cas and Michael sat on sofas opposite each other, glasses of whiskey perched by their knees, iPads balanced on their laps. Castiel smiled at Dean, the lines around his eyes deepening.

Michael didn't smile. He was tanned a deep bronze, his blond hair streaked with sunny highlights. He looked like his younger-by-thirteen-minutes brother Lucas, molded by a weightier clay.

Castiel got up to meet Dean. He reached for Dean's hands, twining their fingers together. He kissed Dean's mouth and heat bloomed in Dean's chest even with that brief contact.

“Hi,” Dean said.

“Hi.” Castiel freed one hand to smooth a lock of Dean's hair, then trailed his fingers down Dean's lapel. “How was your meeting with Inias?”


“I'm sorry,” Cas said. “And I can't meet you for lunch. I need to explain to Michael why we haven't cast everyone in Grosvenor Lane. And about the set construction setbacks. And the location scouting difficulties.”

That didn’t sound good. “Is the production in trouble?”

“No, this is normal. TV's always a bit of a gong show at the start.”

“Michael's the CFO,” Lucas said. “He tenses up over this sort of thing.”

Dean offered Michael a smile. “I hope the meeting goes well, then.”

“Thank you. It was off to a good start already.”

Chilly. “I'll get out of here, then. Cas, text me your plans for the evening?”

“I will.”

“Lucas, are you in this meeting too?”

“Nope.”

“He is,” Michael said.
“Fine,” Lucas sighed. “I'll see Dean off and be right back. Castiel, let the pretty man go.”

Dean leaned in and kissed Castiel again. It felt good. Natural and easy. “See you tonight.”

He turned his back on Michael's hard stare and followed Lucas to the elevator.

“Screw that meeting,” Lucas said. “I'll take you back to your hotel. Where are you staying?”

“Uh, Castiel's place.”

Dean walked into the elevator and turned to see Lucas staring at him, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. Dean blocked the door with his foot. “What, is that weird?”

Lucas joined Dean in the elevator. “Castiel has never had an overnight guest in all the years he's lived there.”

“How many years is that?”

“Seven.”

The elevator plunged in swift descent, leaving Dean's stomach behind.

Lucas crossed his arms. “You know about Ennis.”

“Was that his name?”

“Ennis Ross Darling. So you know he died, and you know when he died. What else do you know?”

“Cas mourned him for a long time,” Dean said. “That's it.”

Lucas looked up at the numbers. “He didn't just mourn. He locked himself away in that apartment they never got to share.”

The elevator lurched to a stop. Dean staggered. They never got to share it. Dean's phone could open the doors. The house knew how hot he liked his showers, when to wake him up.

Castiel had let him in.

“Blew your mind, didn't it?”

“I don't know what to say.”

Lucas led the way past sleek, expensive foreign cars. “Don't hurt him if you don't have to.”

“I don't know what's happening. I didn't know that he—I didn't know.”

“If you're going to chicken out, do it now,” Lucas warned. “If you let him get more invested and then you bounce? I will hunt you down and kick your ass.”

“I will stand still while you do it.”

“Good.” Lucas pointed a keyfob at a gleaming mahogany Boxster. “Are you headed back to Cas's place?”

Dean sidled into the passenger side and the leather seat curved soothingly against his spine. Music blasted the moment Lucas turned the key, a wall of guitar chords and heavy drums.
Lucas turned it down. “Where to?”

“I need groceries. Cas doesn't buy food.”

“Cas could burn water with the stove turned off,” Lucas said. “Let's get you to Pike Market.”

***

There was no way Lucas was coming back to the meeting. Castiel caught the corner of his brother's 'yeah, fuck it' grin just before they turned a corner, headed for the elevators. Castiel wished he were with them.

He'd been irritated all morning, too busy to slip out and see how Dean was doing with Inias. But all the annoyances of the day faded when Dean walked in behind Lucas, his smile lighting up when he saw Castiel. That hello kiss should have been a thousand, and then another hundred. Castiel's hands still tingled where Dean had touched them.

“That was a nice suit Dean was wearing,” Michael said. “It looked new.”

*Oh, here we go.* “It may have been.” Castiel shrugged and consulted his iPad. “We were talking about the struggle with the Historical Society and Location. Here's the budget for constructing set interiors. It should reduce the number of days we need on location by forty percent.”

“The cost overruns Location's budget,” Michael said. “Castiel, he used to be homeless.”

“Oh for fuck's sake, Michael.” Castiel swallowed his drink without tasting it. “Did you seriously order a background check on him while you were in Costa Rica?”

Michael rolled his eyes. “I read it on the plane from Liberia. Do you even know what you've gotten yourself into?”

“Dean is a kind and empathetic person, not that you care.”

Michael leaned back, peering at Castiel. “You gave him an expense account.”

Castiel's veins froze.

“I look over everything,” Michael swiped to a spreadsheet. “We had a content supervisor who used to stress shop. I flagged the system to alert me whenever clothing over $200 registers on an expense account. Dean has good taste.”

“He needed those clothes. To--”

“To look like he fit in. I understand, Castiel. But why couldn't you find someone who already fit in?”

Castiel breathed in, two, three, four. He blew the breath out, and his temples only pounded harder. “He sends scrupulous reports on his purchases.”

“As far as that goes, he's been well behaved.”

“Then what's your problem?”

“You're his sugar daddy.”

Tiny bolts of anger flared over Castiel's scalp. “You know nothing about my relationship with
“Don't growl at me. You did a background too.”

Castiel waved it away. “Of course I did. But unlike you, I see someone who overcame terrible obstacles and still held on to kindness. Still thinks there's good in people. Still has a heart.”

“Of Gold?”

Castiel stood up. “Get out of my office.”

Michael dropped his gaze. “That was uncalled for.”

“You're right. Get out. Now.” Castiel marched to the door and held it open. “If you want to catch up on what's happening with Grosvenor Lane you can read the memos.”

Michael paused at the doorway. “Castiel--”

Castiel straight-armed him past the threshold, slammed the door shut, and locked it. His heart pounded. He’d just bounced his oldest brother out on his ass. But he deserved it. Michael had all but called Dean a whore. He looked down on Dean for growing up poor, for having to fight battles no child should ever face. He didn't see the strength it took to survive. Maybe nobody saw what he saw in Dean.

But Michael had skirted close to the truth. Castiel was paying Dean for companionship.

If he surrendered to his urges—no. They'd only kissed, no matter how vividly he imagined them doing more. They did it in private, but that wasn't part of the deal. It didn't have anything to do with the job Dean was doing for him.

Kissing was all right. Dean had said so. Castiel clung to that permission like it was the tiniest of handholds. Kisses were enough.

He turned his back on the locked door and checked his task list. He still had work to do. If he slacked off it would be one more thing for Michael to use against Dean.

He consulted his inbox and found a forwarded message from castielslady, empty subject line a gap in the thicket of titles.

He touched it and read, *He came to me last night. He begged me to forgive him. You will have nothing.*

***

Lucas parked in an angled space across the street from Pike Market and stopped the blast of psychedelic rock when he turned the Boxster off. Dean unhooked his seatbelt and regarded the interior. His ears rang a little from the slow grooving guitars and tambourines.

“This is a hot car, Lucas.”

“I'm gonna fight tooth and nail to keep it, but I've got to join the sedan squad.”

Dean eyed Lucas with a little grin. “What, already?”

Lucas's smile was wide and satisfied. “I've got a lot of practice coming up next week. Are you coming to the party tonight?”
“Yeah. Cas is going, so I’m going.”

“Good. Let’s get you some food.” Lucas popped his door open and got out. Dean moved carefully, as the neighboring Acura was a little close to let the door open all the way.

“You're coming with me?”

“Sure.” Lucas locked the doors with a jab of his keyfob. “You've got to get what you buy home, right?”

“I was just going to buy what I could carry. It's not far.”

Lucas dropped his hand on Dean's shoulder and jaywalked with brazen disregard for the cars trying to inch down the pedestrian filled street. “Castiel has nothing. He doesn't even have spices. If you're going to cook you need the starter stuff, you can't hump that all the way up to Bell Street.”

“Okay. Sure.” Bright red strawberries in green plastic baskets smelled ripe and sweet. A sample plate bore hulled halves, and the flavor burst in his mouth. Dean picked up a basket and looked around for a carrier.

Lucas found one and held it out. “You pick, I carry. What do you want?”

“I don't know. I have a craving for macaroni and cheese.”

Lucas pursed his lips. “I don't know if you can buy that here.”

Dean scoffed. “Pasta, cream, cheese, onion, eggs, thyme. I think they've got that. Don't you?”

Lucas regarded him with a little surprise. “You can really cook.”

“I said so, didn't I? Come on.”

The main arcade of the market was a swirl of color from neon signs, fresh produce, and bright flowers. Dean followed the smell of freshly caught fish to a stall full of shiny-eyed, fresh caught offerings. He picked out halibut cheeks and fresh smoked salmon and a cloth grocery sack.

Lucas took the sack and followed Dean to another fruit stand. “So Dean.”

“Hm?”

“Tell me how you wound up dating Castiel.”

Dean swallowed down the twinge of anxiety at the question. “He called me after I auditioned for a part and asked me to have dinner with him.”

Lucas set down the scarlet and gold apple he'd been examining. “You're kidding.”

“I'm not.”

“Did you get the part?”

“No.”

Lucas laughed. “That was a dick move. He could have at least hired you for something.”

Dean picked up the first fruit that fell under his hand, a bunch of organic bananas. “Lucas. Maybe
you didn't notice this. Your brother is kinda cute.”

“And he doesn't like bananas.”

Dean set them down. “Then let's move on.”

He didn't look at receipts. He paid and folded them carefully, stuffing them inside his breast pocket. They passed a flower stall and found a shop that sold milk and eggs. Lucas rebalanced the grocery bags, sneaking a glance at Dean. “I'm surprised he's dating you.”

That could mean a bunch of different things. Dean picked out a tub of Greek yogurt. “Why?”

“My brother doesn't do anything on impulse. He thinks. He plans. He organizes.”

“So calling me three minutes after I walk out the door so he can ask me to dinner is out of character.”

“Wildly.”

Dean grinned. “That's damn good for my ego, Lucas.”

“Well. I can see why he did it.” Glass bottles clinked together as Lucas led the way out of the crowd. “What are your intentions toward my brother, anyway?”

“I knew this question was coming.”

Lucas laughed. “So you have an answer all planned out?”

“Not really,” Dean said. “I like him. I think he likes me--”

“Oh, I think that's fair to say,” Lucas said.

“We have fun. That's all it needs to be right now.”

“What about later?”

“I am purposefully not thinking about it.”

Lucas strolled into the street, forcing a woman in a Lexus to stop as they jaywalked back to the Boxster. “Are you commitment shy, Dean?”

Sunlight warmed him and he glanced at the sky. “I think it's going to clear up. Should be a nice afternoon--”

“Way to change the subject.”

Dean's phone vibrated. “Shit.” he moved the bags in his right hand to the left but he missed the call.

“Was that Cas?”

“It was.” He jabbed at the screen to call back. A photographer snapped pictures of him and Lucas loading groceries into the car. Fuck, this was his life? What were people going to say when these photos hit the internet?

“Castiel Novak.”

Dean turned his back on the photographer. “Cas? Sorry. I had my hands full.”
“It's okay. I can go for lunch after all. Where are you?”

Dean rounded the Porsche’s flank and got in the passenger side. He set the phone on speaker. “I just bought a bunch of groceries.”

“How are you going to get them home?”

“Lucas helped.”

“Hey, brother.” Lucas slammed the driver's side door and started the engine. “Your handsome lad can cook.”

“Hi, Lucas. Dean, I didn't mean you had to fend for yourself. There are plenty of restaurants nearby.”

Dean dragged the seatbelt across his body. “I like to cook. And you have that awesome kitchen, it's practically a sin.”

“You should see the stuff he bought,” Lucas said, waiting for a pedestrian to cross. “I want to stay for lunch.”

“I could cook for three. What do you think, Cas?”

Castiel paused for a few seconds. Dean traded glances with Lucas.

“Yes.”

Lucas's shoulders sank as he let out a breath.

“You sure?” Dean asked.

“If you don't mind cooking for the three of us, let's have lunch. It's clearing up, we can eat on the roof. Should I bring some wine?”

“Buy white wine, Castiel,” Lucas said. “We're having fish. Something chillly and sweet, not one of your big bruisy reds. Wait, how did you get loose from Michael? Shouldn't he be interrogating you about the location budget?”

Another pause. “I told him to go read the memos. I think we need to construct the sets.”

Lucas changed lanes. “Hold on, let me take a run at it. Maybe there's something they really want. Are you still standing around in your office?”

“I'm in the elevator. I'm going to lose you.”

“See you at the house, brother.”

“See you, Cas.”

Lucas grinned. “Home cooked lunch. You know, I've never had lunch at Castiel's? You're a good influence. Maybe you should think about the future.”
The scent of cooking cheese greeted Castiel at the door. A tiny sting caught him in the heart. He'd never come home to a meal about to go on the table.

And—was that singing? He dropped his bag on the floor next to the shoe rack. That was singing.

Dean belted out “Luck be a Lady” to the sound system. Castiel crossed the black and white tiled floor to the kitchen, where Dean and Lucas cavorted while prepping vegetables.

Lucas was doing an uneven job of slicing strawberries, a denim apron tied around his hips with his shirtsleeves rolled up and his tie dropped on the computer station counter. Dean's movements with a knife were faster. He scooped up mushroom stems, side stepped to the trash can and dropped them in, dancing back to his place at the counter. Even Lucas was getting into it, shoulders shrugging to the rhythm. An open bottle of wine rested next to two half-drunk glasses.

Castiel stared at the surreal, domestic scene in front of him. Lucas had been in his home before, but never for longer than a few minutes, and now he was helping in the kitchen. But that should be Castiel, slicing strawberries in uneven width. It was his kitchen. His boyfriend--

Not his boyfriend. Dean was performing right now, and maybe he wouldn't be like this when they were alone. Maybe he'd be more reserved. He wouldn't need to entertain Castiel with antics when they were alone.

Dean spotted him and set the knife down, wiping his hands on his apron. His smile was the sun breaking through clouds. He was the heart of the room, Lucas's bemused smile a distant satellite. Castiel wished that smile was just for him.

Dean danced closer and set his hands on Castiel's hips. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

Dean's smile brightened for a second before he leaned in. His kiss tasted like wine and Castiel pulled him in for another, so what if Lucas was right there? And another kiss that lingered a little and curved Dean's lips into another smile, and Lucas's presence lit a flame of irritation. Why couldn't they be alone, so they didn't have to pretend?

Would Dean kiss him like this if they were alone?

Dean chuckled and pulled back. “Any more of that and you're going to have to chuck your brother out of here.”

“Lucas, get out.”

Lucas dragged the wineglass away from his mouth. “What, really?”

Castiel was so tempted to say yes. “No, not really. You helped cook. Can I do anything, Dean?”

“Don't let him,” Lucas warned.

Dean popped a kiss on Castiel's cheek and danced out of reach. It felt so natural. Like they'd been doing it for months. “Only thing left is the halibut. Cas, can you toss the salad? Dressing's in that jar, it's a mango cayenne vinaigrette.”
“He made it,” Lucas said.

Dean flipped over little chunks of white fish in a breadcrumb mix. “If that impressed you, watch me make Caesar salad. We did it at the table at Hy's. It's an entire performance.”

Castiel did his best not to flip spinach leaves everywhere. “Majel, chance of rain this afternoon?”

“Twenty percent.”

“I like those odds. Majel, start the rooftop heaters.”

Castiel found plates and silverware and Lucas followed with the wine. Dean stayed downstairs, predicting he'd be up in five minutes. Castiel expected that Lucas was going to use them.

He didn't have to wait long. Lucas set the bottles down and put his hands on his hips. “You seriously asked him out after he auditioned for you, and you didn't even give him the part?”

“I thought it wouldn't be ethical.”

Lucas laughed. “What a peculiar thing you are, Castiel. And since when do you do anything without a plan?”

He hadn't. “Lucas, I know you're heterosexual, but have you seen him?”

Lucas slouched in a patio chair and turned his face to the sun. “You see good looking men all the time. Dash is nearly as pretty as him.”

Castiel shrugged and opened the second bottle. “He stood out.”

Lucas gave him a considering look. “You like him.”

“Of course I do.”

“Are you moving too fast?”

Castiel managed to swallow a casual mouthful of wine. “What do you mean?”

Lucas glanced over his shoulder. “He's here. Majel talks to him.”

“It's easier that way, since he's staying here.”

“That's my point. You could have tucked him up all snug in a hotel, but he's here. Cooking in your kitchen.” He cocked his head. “Sleeping in your bed?”

Castiel shrugged. “My kitchen, my bed, my business.”

One of the ferries to Bainbridge Island pulled out of the dock. A breeze gusted, banishing the warm air from the patio heaters.

Lucas tipped his glass back. “Don't get all ruffled. I like Dean. I don't give a damn about his childhood.”

Castiel closed his eyes against the ache in his temples. “I am sick of everyone in this family doing background checks on Dean.”

Lucas put up his hands. “Not me. Michael. He emailed me this morning.”
“And you read them?”

It was Lucas's turn to shrug. “Curiosity killed the cat.”

Michael wouldn't stop there. Castiel dragged in a steadying breath. “Did he send them to everyone?”

Lucas's mouth turned down. “I'm afraid he did.”

“Oh for fuck's sake!” Castiel pulled out his phone.

Lucas snatched it out of his hands.

“Give that back.”

“No. You can't put the squid back in the bag. Mother won't care. She will hear nothing bad about a handsome man who can dance. Dad will ask three questions--”

“Do you like him, does he like you, what's his handicap,” Castiel said.

“And Anna will be concerned, but mostly about the industry connections. Michael can kick rocks.”

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Lucas handed Castiel his phone back and met Dean at the entrance. “Do you need help with anything?”

Dean bore a casserole dish and a covered skillet in mittened hands. “I got it. Waiter, remember? Here we go--”

He set the dishes down and sat next to Castiel, finishing the last of his wine in the glass. Lucas poured a refill as Dean dished out delicately pan-seared fish and gooey cheese covered pasta.

Castiel tasted the fish, breaded in crumbs and herbs, flaky on his fork.

“Damn, Dean. This is really good,” Lucas said.

“I should have bought more fish. But there's plenty of macaroni and cheese.”

Oh, I need to try that too—mm! Keep him, Cas.”

Castiel did his best to smile. “I think he gets a say in that, brother.”

***

Something had happened while Lucas and Castiel were alone up there on the roof. Dean did his best to sail through it, enjoying the view of Elliott Bay the rooftop patio boasted. And Castiel did his best to put on a good face. He'd complimented all the dishes, leaned over to kiss his cheek, kept Dean's knee warm by resting his hand on it. Lucas told Dean how he'd managed to convince Sarah to go on a date with him, back when he met her at a fundraiser for child literacy or something rich people did instead of chipping in for a keg and rolling the carpets back for a party.

Castiel had been angry when Dean made it upstairs, putting his phone away with an ugly scowl that was gone by the time Dean veered around Lucas to bring lunch to the table. Castiel simmered all through the meal, and it made Dean's chest constrict when he figured out what it was.

Castiel didn't like surprises.
Castiel had never had guests over. Had never cooked in the kitchen. And then Dean went and filled his kitchen with food, used pots and knives that had barely been touched, set him up in a situation where he would have looked churlish if he'd said no to Lucas coming over to eat. Dean had presumed about six miles too far, and he had to fix it.

Castiel had pulled him close for a handful of kisses while Lucas looked on with a knowing little grin. Dean had laughed as they left for the office, breathing fully only when the door clicked shut and their voices faded.

First thing – clean the rest of the kitchen. Think. And try to make it up to Castiel, somehow.

“Hello, Majel.”

“Hello, Dean. How can I help?”

“Play my Blues and Boogie playlist, shuffled?”

Saxophones and a simple beat introduced Ruth Brown's smooth contralto singing about waiting for her sweetheart. The easy tempo and cheery horns had him moving through the kitchen to fill the dishwasher, wipe the counters, and erase the evidence. The last quarter bottle of white wine rested next to a rack of several reds.

Sam's ringtone set Dean's phone buzzing on the counter, and he scrambled to answer it. “Hey Sammy.”

“Dean. Why are you playing oldies? Are you doing housework? Are you in my apartment?”

Shit. Shit. “No, I’m—just taking care of a couple things--”

“You're at Castiel's.”

Fuck. “I cooked lunch.”

“Is he there? Put us on speaker.”

Dean sighed and leaned across the counter for that last glass of wine. “He isn't here. He went back to the office.”

Silence reigned for a long moment. “You're staying there, aren't you.”

“Sam--”

“I saw the pictures. You were shopping at Pike Market with his brother.”

Dean set his wineglass down. “The pictures are on the internet already?”

“Comments range from cheating bastard to one of the family already to Netwatch needs their Chief Networking Officer to keep the PR relationship going because you got greedy for more money.”

Dean's laugh was uneasy. “I had a craving for Aunt Ellen's mac and cheese.”

“What happened to the hotel?”

“We--” He couldn't tell Sam about castielslady. He'd flip over nothing. “We're adults, Sam.”

“He said he wouldn't take advantage of you.”
What, like he was some teenager? “Come on, Sam. What do you think this is?”

“I think you're into him.”

Words dried up in Dean's mouth. He wet his tongue with more wine, forcing his shoulders to come back down. “This isn't a conversation I want to have with my little brother.”

“I saw you two together.”

“And I'm a professional actor.” Castiel had been pretending.

“And I know you, Dean. I've seen you around the real thing.” Sam sighed. “I don't want to see you get hurt.”

“This isn't why you called,” Dean said.

“It's not. I have your bill. It's for $747.50.”

“Okay. Lemme get my card, I'll read you the numbers. You got a pen?”

“In my hand.”

Dean pulled his wallet out and read the numbers from his charge card. “There you go, I'm officially your client.”

“Feels weird.”

“I'll be back to paying you in housework and errands after this.”

“Yeah. I better go, I have to meet a client. Prenuptial agreement.”

“Break a leg, Sammy.”

I think you're into him. Dean hunched his shoulders. It wasn't...

It was. His little brother knew him too well. Being here made it feel real, made it easy to forget. And Cas wanted him. Dean knew it. It was in the way Castiel held himself back, forbidding himself to bend, and the way that resistance broke and swept him away. All those years he'd held back. Dean imagined Castiel paying that debt to his body and it seared to imagine Castiel letting go.

Hopefully the walls between suites were thick. And that assumed they cleared up whatever had made Cas angry.

He'd start with an apology. “Cas, I really should have asked you before doing all of that.”

That was a good start. No explanations, no justifications, no excuses. He tried it again. “Cas, I really should have asked you first before doing all of that.”

“If you had, I would have said okay.”

***

Dean bobbled his wineglass, caught it, and spun around. “You're here.”

He couldn't stay away. “I did make it to my office.” Castiel stepped a little closer. “I sat in my chair
and tried to work. But I couldn't focus.”

“Because I blew up your routine.”

“Nobody ever cooked in that kitchen before.”

Dean bit down on his lips. “I should have asked.”

“And I would have said yes.” Castiel stopped just inside arm's reach. “That's what all that stuff's for.”

It had been nice. A pretty, breezy spring afternoon, Lucas's jokes, relaxed conversation. Dean by his side, talking wine, local music, and asking questions about the production side of the business. A part of him thought he ought to be uncomfortable, but he hadn't been. It felt so normal. Like they did it all the time.

Dean leaned against the glass-topped counter. “All that stuff. You bought it for him, and he never got to use it.”

“He never did.” Ennis had never cooked in the kitchen Castiel researched for him. But Dean had turned the empty, lonely space warm with music and gladness. Old time rhythm and blues played on the kitchen's sound and Dean fit in this space as comfortably as he lounged in front of the TV. “I'm glad you did.”

Dean's mouth went tight and he scratched the back of his head. “Cas. Do I...do I remind you of him?”

Oh. “No. You don't look anything alike. Here.”

Castiel took out his phone, tapped the screen, and held it out. It showed a picture of a handsome man with tight coiled hair trimmed close to his scalp, with golden-bronze skin and dark, smiling eyes. “You cook. He did too. He could dance, but not like you. You're taller. We met in law school.”

“Did you miss him today, while I was in his kitchen?”

For a second. “Dean. I don't wish you were him. I miss him. It's been hard, with all the weddings. But I didn't--”

“You didn't hire me to be him.”

“I didn't hire you to be him.”

“Okay.” Dean's face relaxed. “Is it okay if I...I want to hug you.”

Castiel stepped into Dean's arms. Dean enveloped him, one arm around his back, the other around his shoulders, touching from cheek to knees. Castiel didn't know how much he hurt until Dean's warmth soaked into him and smoothed it into a soft, unthinking peace. He stroked Castiel's back, swayed gently to the music, songs about love and desire and loyalty.

Castiel never wanted to let go.

He lifted his head and stepped back. “Dean. Thank you for making lunch. But you don't have to do this.”

Dean blinked. “What, the hugging?”
“Yes. We're in private,” Castiel said.

“Oh.” Dean turned his face away. “Sorry.”

He'd screwed up. “I don't mean—I don't mean that I don't like hugging you. I do. But you don't have to.”

Dean looked back. “You mean, I don't have to, because we're in private. That I shouldn't feel obligated.”

“Right.” He was cold where Dean had been touching him. “I know I invited you here and I don't want you to think that I--”

“I want to kiss you.”

Castiel's breath caught.

Dean faltered. “If—if you want to.”

Yes. Oh, yes. “You can kiss me.”

He came closer, catching Castiel's face in his hands. Castiel kept his eyes open, unwilling to miss a second of Dean coming closer, the fringes of his eyelashes casting shadows over his freckled cheeks.

The first touch was light as air, soft as a question Castiel answered by pressing closer. But Dean drew away, came back with a feather's touch, his thumbs pressed into the corners of Castiel's jaw. Castiel stood still and let him.

Before long he was trembling with the effort to hold himself down. He felt like he was going to float away.

When Dean lifted his head, Castiel felt lost. His fingers drifted down Castiel’s face, and Castiel leaned into the touch, closing his eyes.

“I liked making lunch for you. I liked having Lucas over. I'm a bit of an extrovert.”

“I liked having Lucas over. We eat lunch all the time, in restaurants. This felt different.”

“Good different or bad different?”

It felt like home. Castiel reached for Dean's hands, clasping them. “I want to ditch the party tonight.”

“We can’t do that,” Dean moved closer, brushing his lips over Castiel’s chin. “But we can leave early.”
Amethysts

They had to go to this party, Dean kept saying. Castiel helped with cleanup by interrupting for kissing breaks and having at least half an idea where the pots and pans belonged. He chased Dean up the stairs and their laughter echoed through the empty living room, but Dean made Castiel use the downstairs bathroom to shower and dress. If they started now? They weren’t going anywhere.

They listened to pop music in the car, heading south out of downtown. Castiel pulled into a parking lot with a low brick building bearing an old style black and white painted advertisement: Starlight Roller Skating Rink.

“Lucas is having his bachelor party at a roller rink?”

“It’s not a bachelor party,” Castiel said. “Lucas and Sarah are having the party together.”

Which told Dean something about Lucas and Sarah - they were close, and probably shared the same circle of friends. “Sam and Jess are doing that. We’re gonna play softball, Winchesters vs. Moores.”

“Fast pitch or slow?”

“Slow. You wanna play?”

“How serious is this game?”

Dean laughed. “We’re all going to be smashed by the seventh inning.”

“Then I’ll play.”

Castiel guided the Tesla at a prow through the crowded parking lot. Dean spotted Lucas’s Boxster in the closest spot to the door but it kept company with BMWs, Aston Martins, and a fleet of Teslas. Dean glanced down at himself. He’d chosen jeans to go with a black shadow-striped shirt. He looked fine. They were going rollerskating, not to the opera. He waited for Castiel to take his hand and Dean tried to shake the feeling that he didn’t belong here.

Music thumped through the building. An old Marvin Gaye tune went straight to his feet. He flashed out in front of Castiel in a triple step, cha-cha-cha, and grinned when Cas picked it up and they danced over the colorful printed carpet.

“Can you do that on skates?” Castiel asked.

“Nah. Can you?”

Castiel shook his head and turned Dean toward the skate rental booth. Dean accepted a pair of brown leather skates and nodded to a woman rolling by on her way to the keg, red plastic cup in hand.

Dean nudged Castiel as they sat down to lace up skates. “Okay I’ll bite. Why here.”

Castiel looked up. “Lucas, why here?”

Lucas skated over and sat down. “This is where we had our first date. Well. In a way.”

“In a way?”
“I asked her out at the fundraiser where we met, but she said she couldn’t go because she was going out rollerskating with her sorority sisters. They’d done a thing where they took on middle school girls with good grades in schools with shitty funding, declared them Mini Kappas, gave them a group to bond with and graduate together.”

Dean laced up his second boot. “So you figured out where, showed up?”

“Figured out where, showed up, bought a pizza party, and recruited all the Mini Kappas to my cause. She had no chance after that.”

“It’s very hard to say no to Lucas,” Castiel said.

“Speaking of. Come and put your name in for karaoke.”

Lucas gestured for him to follow and Dean rolled along, coming to a table with a stack of books and a short guy with brown hair and a moustache that curled at the ends.

“This is Gabriel. He’s our cousin.”

Dean smiled. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You’ve got to be Castiel’s surprise boyfriend,” Gabriel said. “Don’t believe anything they tell you about the rowboat. I had nothing to do with it.”

Dean blinked. “Okay.”

“Now you need to know the rules of Luke and Sarah’s excellent Karaoke adventure. Rule number one is—”

Lucas and Gabriel said it together. “No Ballads!”

“There will be enough of that mushy stuff at the wedding tomorrow. Party tunes only. Sexy tunes are okay, but no mushy stuff.”

“Got it.”

“You might not get to sing,” Gabriel said. “We’ve got the wedding party on the hook for a lot of the slots. But here’s where we do it differently. You get two slips. Write your name on this one.”

Dean wrote his name on the first slip.

“Now the next one is for your song. Don’t put your name on that one. You get called, you come up, you get a random song. Do your best.”

Dean picked up a book and opened a page at random, stabbing his finger down on a selection. He checked it, and grinned. He wrote the song down and handed over the slip.

“Okay that’s how you do it,” Gabriel said. “No time wasted. Oh, and if you catch anyone talking about work, it’s a thousand dollar fine, payable to Reading is Fundamental. Enforce it!”

Dean hoped he didn’t pale. A thousand dollars? Well, they could afford it. No one was going to want to talk to him anyway.

Castiel brought two Solo cups filled with a beer that smelled like it didn’t belong in a plastic cup at all. They touched glasses and drank a smooth red ale, and Castiel looked at the contents of his cup with a surprised nod.
“It’s good.”

Castiel took another sip. “I handed over my keys. With this beer I don’t get them back for an hour. I have to stay until I sing, but then we can get out of here.”

“How long do they have the rink for?”

“Until midnight.”

“Yeah, we’ll be long gone by then,” Dean said. “Care to skate?”

Castiel was good on wheels, joining the counterclockwise crowd with the casual posture of someone who spent a lot of time in skates. He caught Dean’s hand and sped through the crowd, catching up to Ezekiel and—

And Joel. He skated around the bend in easy crossovers, pivoting on his left foot to go backwards at the same speed others were going forwards. He rolled right into Dean’s arms and gave him a spine-popping hug.

“Joel. You’re skating!”

Joel laughed at Dean’s astonished look and lifted his right leg. “Prosthetic’s got a joint at the ankle.”

“That’s awesome.”

“This one’s new. There’s a commercial coming up, actually. Zeke directed it.”

“For the foot?”

Joel turned around and skated alongside Dean. “Yeah. Showed it to the team. Not a dry eye in the room, and they helped make it. Did Castiel tell you we’re going to play golf at our wedding?”

“He hadn’t yet. I’m rusty.”

“You’ll get that rust knocked off,” Joel said. “The Novak men golf, and that’s that.”

The Novak men. Ezekiel was close enough to be part of the family, close enough that Joel was one too. That’s what Dean would be, if this were real.

“Joel, are you stealing Dean again?” Zeke asked.

“Castiel didn’t tell him about golf. And we’ve definitely got a game five against the Flames if you wanted to catch it.”

Dean laughed. “Miss a playoff game in the arena? I wouldn’t. My roommates would kill me.”

“Great! Oh no, here comes trouble.”

“Trouble” was a slim woman with long red hair and huge hazel eyes. Anna Novak matched their skating pace and smiled. “I thought I’d come over and meet Dean for myself. I’m Anna.”

“Hi.”

“I just got in from New York a couple hours ago. I’m sorry I missed you at Michael’s wedding.”
“That’s all right,” Dean said. “We wound up leaving pretty early.”

“Mother says you’re an excellent dancer. She’s looking forward to another. You might need a dance card tomorrow.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“And if you had a few minutes, could we find somewhere to talk? I’d ask you to meet me in the office—”

“Thousand bucks,” Castiel said.

Anna unfolded a piece of paper and handed it over. “Already written for five. There’s no other time to do this.”

“Do what?” Dean asked.

“Media training. Crash course before Lucas’s wedding.”

“Right,” Dean said. “Do you want to talk now?”

“I do. Castiel, I’m stealing your man.”

Castiel waved his hand, and looked up as the music stopped. “Next up, it’s Castiel! Come up here and sing, cousin.”

Castiel groaned. “I am not drunk enough for this.”

“If you want to get drunk enough, I’ll drive,” Dean offered.

“You’re sweet. Let me get this over with.”

Castiel rolled up to the stage. Anna veered off the wooden rink and led them away from the glittering disco ball lights. She chose a relatively quiet corner and sat down on a tall stool.

You probably already know that I'm the chief brand officer. Now you don't actually work for us, but if you're dating Castiel, you're associated with the brand.”

“I am?” Dean blinked. “I'm just—I'm just a guy.”

“This is what it's like, I'm afraid.” Anna's smile was apologetic. “You're already a subject for celebrity photographers, and I understand that you've gained attention from Castiel's fans.”

Dean cleared his throat. “Yes. Uh. Do you know about--”

“Margaret? I do. Inias told me you passed Stalker 101. Next is media training.”

“Right,” Dean said. “Where do we start?”

“Personal narrative.” Anna took out her phone and swiped her way to a PDF titled Key Points for Interviews. “I've emailed you a copy of this document. It's a rough guideline to help you through any questions the media might have about your childhood homelessness.”

“My...”

Dean sucked in air through the tight squeeze of his throat. How does she know? How--
The answer bowed his shoulders. He lifted his head. “Did you do a background check on me?”

“It was Michael. He sent me a copy yesterday.”

Was his heart beating? He couldn't feel it. He couldn't feel his feet. He flexed his fingers, stretching them from their cramped up fists. “Who else got a copy?”

“Just the immediate family,” Anna shrugged. “We can handle this. Everyone loves a success story. You can tell it as rising above the tragedy of losing your mother at a young age.”

Dean's heart kicked and pounded, startled back to life. “You---all of you know about my childhood?”

“Well, we do now,” Anna said. “Castiel really should have been more diligent. I should have known about this last week, not two days before Lucas's wedding. Your time in juvenile detention---”

Dean unclenched his jaw. “It was a boy's home.”

“--That was where your life turned around. Not just for you but for your father, who went into AA and settled down with Kate Milligan and your half brother Adam.”

Dean turned to look at the skaters. “You have the background.”

Michael had sent it to the family. That meant Lucas knew and still treated him like a friend. Naomi wanted another dance, just as if it didn't matter. Castiel...had hired him anyway. Maybe it didn't matter to them.

Who was he kidding? It mattered.

“Dean.” Anna reached over and covered his hand. A large amethyst and diamond ring glittered on her left ring finger. “It's not fair that I know all these things about you before I even get to know you. But this is the reality of our situation.”

Dean forced a laugh through his burning throat. “The one where the rich bachelor dates the working class prole?”

“I mean public life,” Anna said. “You'd be facing this as an actor anyway. Sooner or later your story would come out. Everyone's got skeletons. Nobody's life is cream and roses, even with money.”

Dean had seen pictures of Anna looking skeletal and hollow-eyed, underlined by ecstatic headlines about her party-girl lifestyle. If anyone knew what it felt like, it was Anna.

Dean fidgeted. “This is a lot to take in.”

“It's better we knew ahead of time.”

“How is it better that you know things I don't tell anyone?”

“This way, we can use it to make you relatable. The other way, the media gets to decide what your story is.”

“And they'd make me out to be a gold digger,” Dean sighed. “Okay, fine. Steer my narrative, or whatever.”
“That's the spirit.” Anna squeezed his hand. “Now buck up. Your private life has a couple peepholes in it. We all have to deal.”

***

Anna had taken Dean out of sight while Castiel sang *I'm too Sexy*, but he found them in a dim corner. Anna leaned over the little table, caught Dean’s hand, talking fast as she did. Dean scowled, his face hard. He said something that made Anna flinch, but come right back with that same earnestness.

Dean finally sighed, conceding whatever they’d been arguing. Anna smiled in relief and led Dean past the velvet rope that blocked the collection of tables from the rest of the party.

Dean saw him and changed to the easy smile, the *everything’s fine and I’m a professional* smile. His hand skimming down Castiel’s arm was precise, affectionate, the kiss delivered to his cheek easy and practiced.

Dean had his game face on. He kept it up while he did some kind of dance routine he and Joel knew, skated backwards holding Castiel’s hands. He smiled, and Castiel felt cold fingers up his back.

He guided Dean around the rink while Lucas capered onstage singing *Uptown Funk*, swallowing down nausea. “Should we stay till the end?”

Dean’s smile never faltered. “Let’s get out of here.”

He held Castiel’s hand as they left, letting go only to walk to the Tesla’s passenger side.

“Are we in private?” Dean asked.

The question made his heart trip. “Yes.”

“Okay,” Dean said. He rubbed his face, and turned his head to look out the window.

Silence filled the car, so thick Castiel wanted to open a window and take a desperate breath of air, to feel it whistling by.

“You’re not okay,” Castiel finally said.

Dean turned back, his jaw tight. “Did you do a background check on me, Castiel?”

Castiel. Not Cas. It throbbed painfully in his chest. “I did.”

“And you still hired me for the job.”

Of course he did. Did Dean think that mattered?

“I did.”

“Why?”

Because there wasn't any other choice. It had to be him. “You were the best.”

“So my life of crime didn't matter?”

“One shoplifting charge. Dropped. That's not bad. Anna's got seven shoplifting arrests, did you
know that?"

Dean blinked. “What would she need to steal for? She could buy anything she wanted.”

“It's a long story,” Castiel said. “You were the best, Dean. By miles.”

“But you did a background check.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair, breaking up the neat comb lines. “But you didn't hand it to the rest of the family.”

“I wouldn't,” Castiel said. “It's not their business. Michael is highly conscious of appearances, and—fuck it. He's a snob. A new money snob, which makes it worse.”

“And he flipped his curly blond wig when he found up I grew up in motels.”

If Michael had ruined this for Cas before he'd even figured out what 'this' was... “That's about what happened. Dean, I'm sorry.”

Dean shrugged. “I'm not mad. Michael was just doing what he thought was right.”

“But I did it too.”

“You were vetting an employee. Independent contractor. Whatever.” Dean turned his face away. “I just lost sight of what I was doing here.”

“And what is that?” Castiel asked. His throat tightened. He held his breath.

“I'm working for you,” Dean said. “And so I should check into a hotel.”


“What about your silver?”

_God damn you, Michael._ “Dean. I don't think you're a thief. Stay in my house. Drink all my good wine. Watch my porn. You don't have to stay with me, but I trust you. What you did as a kid doesn't matter.”

“What would have mattered, Cas? Theft? Robbery? Possession with intent? Prostitution? Would you have hired me if I had any of those?”

“Are you saying you did those things, and never got caught?”

Dean shrugged. “What if I am?”

It didn't matter. None of it mattered. “Whatever you might have done back then, you're not doing it now.”

Dean cocked his head. “I'm not?”

“No. You are not.”

Dean held Castiel's stare for a few moments. He sighed and slumped, head low. “I need to think. I don't tell people my past. They judge me. And Michael took that from me.”

Castiel had taken it too. “I would have kept your secrets a secret.”
“Yeah. You asked me all about myself, like you didn't already know all the answers.”

“Should I have told you, Dean?”

He pressed his lips together. “You just wanted to protect yourself. I get it. I do. But—let me be mad, okay? We'll talk about it after the wedding.”

“You're still coming to the wedding?”

“Of course,” Dean said. “We have a deal.”
Blank Check

Dean booked into the Olympic hotel and scheduled spa appointments in every spare minute he had, charging them to the expense account. He ordered breakfast from room service, wine that corked at five hundred dollars, shopped for clothes to wear so he wouldn't have to go back to Castiel's apartment. He took Jess's Maid of Honor Ashley to the hotel’s dining room for Wagyu burgers and hammered down the last of Sam and Jess’s wedding plans while they got a little dizzy on a local cabernet.

He'd feel guilty about it later. For right now, he had a fresh haircut and a realization – he wouldn't have gotten anywhere near Castiel without him knowing his public record. He couldn't meet Castiel on equal ground. There was no such thing where they were concerned. Castiel hadn't befriended him. Dean had been hired.

The rest? That was...Dean didn't know what it was. A seven year itch. The effect of Dean's face. It didn't really matter, did it? Cas was attractive. Cas was attracted. But what mattered was the job, and he was going to be the best.

By miles.

It was an easy walk from the Olympic to the Arctic Club. A key to Castiel's room waited for him at the front desk. His tuxedo hung in the suite's closet, but the room was empty. A crystal vase full of hyacinths rested on a table next to the window. Were they Castiel's favorite flower?

He dressed and rode the elevator down to the third floor.

The Dome Room was spectacular. Dean looked up at the dazzling stained glass dome and heavy crystal chandelier at the heart of Seattle's historic Gold Rush club. It would take a fortune in gold to build a room like this one. Dean understood why Lucas waited two years to have the wedding and reception here.

He took a seat in the middle of the crowd. Castiel stood next to his brother in an eerie echo of their second date, dressed in the same suit, holding up a brother who was shaky from nerves and excitement while they waited for the bride to appear.

Lucas's eyes lit up when the musicians struck the first chords of *Air on a G String*. A frisson spread from his cheeks down his arms and legs as the strings rose and caught the peculiar trick of a domed room, sounding all around him.

Everyone rose to their feet and turned. Sarah stood next to her father in a column of white silk and glittering crystals. She paced the orchid-strewn aisle stately as a swan, one languid step after another.

Lucas swiped his eyes and couldn't stop smiling, his grip on Castiel's shoulder the only thing holding him up. Castiel had a smile of his own this time, and he leaned over to whisper in Lucas's ear before they turned to face the officiant.

Lucas didn't see anything in the room but Sarah. Dean witnessed a great love, one that sank into the bones and heart of a person to live there forever. He had never felt that way before, not about anyone. No one had ever lived under his skin.

The absence twinged as Lucas took Sarah in his arms, gentle as if he held a rose of spun glass and kissed his bride.
Castiel stood in the reception line and shook hands, agreeing that the bride looked beautiful, that the room was lovely, that the ceremony was touching. He tried not to look past them into the crowd looking for a glimpse of sandy hair, the corner of a smile, the casual ease with which Dean talked to strangers who wanted a look at Castiel's first beau in years.

*His first since Ennis,* some would whisper, the sibilance carrying to the edge of his hearing. He couldn't blame them for thinking it, not when he felt Ennis just out of sight. He'd liked Lucas, and would have wanted to be there.

Castiel wondered if Ennis would like Dean.

Castiel had woken up that morning reaching into the empty half of his bed. Brought down two mugs to make a pair of lattes, and then stood in his empty, silent room realizing that it had felt fuller when Dean was there, and now felt lonely without him. Would Dean forgive him and come back?

Castiel shook hands, and Dean moved away from a conversation to nibble at the buffet. He caught Castiel's eye and winked.

Warmth tingled over Castiel's hands. The crowd shifted, got in the way of Dean's smile, and another guest shuffled up to shake hands.

***

This wedding was giving Dean indigestion. How much was filet mignon and prosciutto prawns for two hundred and fifty guests? The bottles of Veuve Clicquot on every table? A live freaking orchestra playing tinkly music during the meal?

It didn't matter. This wasn't his circus, and these weren't his monkeys. He just had to sit and eat this perfect, medium rare steak, and wish that they'd chosen a merlot instead of the malbec.

“Was waiting two years worth it?” Hael asked.

“This is where we met,” Lucas explained. “It had to be right here.”

“Finally, I can eat something,” Sarah said, cutting a delicate slice of her filet. “I was about ready to kill for a cookie. I'm going to have three pieces of cake and a great big glass of milk.”

Lucas leaned over and kissed Sarah's shoulder. “You could get fat. You'd be adorable fat.”

“No I wouldn't.”

He took her hand and kissed each knuckle. “Diets are dumb. Let's eat cake right now.”

“Lucas, you can't have dessert until you're finished your meat,” Naomi said, and winked at Dean. Dean smiled back. The plate probably cost a hundred and fifty dollars, doing up the math in his head.

Castiel didn't say much, only asking how he liked each course. Anna wore the deep violet colors of the bridal party, the amethyst and diamond ring gone from her finger. No line around her marriage finger betrayed its absence. Anna gave him a swift, pleading look, and Dean averted his question about the ring.
Evan came around to take their dinner plates, and the orchestra gained a vocalist, a beautiful woman in a blue gown. Lucas and Sarah took the floor and danced to *The Way You Look Tonight.*

Anna leaned over to whisper, “Don't they look great?”

“Straight out of the movies,” Dean agreed.

Anna hid a smirk behind a glass of sparkling golden liquid. “Hael's been simmering all night. She decided to push her date so it was before Sarah's, and had to settle for a generic looking venue.”

“Hey, that hotel was nice.”

Anna patted his shoulder. “Just you wait until May. You haven't seen anything yet.”

Evan came by and refilled Anna's glass from a tall green bottle, and Dean covered his wineglass. “The meal was great, Evan. Thank you.”

Anna raised one eyebrow. “Yes, it was wonderful.” She opened her purse and slipped him a crisp 50 dollar bill. “For taking care of me.”

Evan smiled and the money vanished into his pocket.

Dean eyed Anna's glass. “I know a quitter when I see one. How long?”

“I have my one year medal,” Anna said. “It took me nineteen months to get it.”

“That's good. That's fast,” Dean said.

Anna scanned the first couples joining Lucas and Sarah to the floor. Castiel danced with Hael, and Michael stood talking to Dash, unconcerned with the dance he was missing with his sister.

“I should be up there,” Anna said.

“But Michael's your partner,” Dean said. “And you were forced to miss his wedding.”

“Yes. Most unfortunate,” Anna said. “Dance with me now, Dean.”

She stood up and straightened her dress. She put out her hand, shoulders squared with her deep breath.

He couldn't refuse her now.

Heads turned as he walked Anna to the dance floor. They stood in frame for a moment, and Anna knew when to break into step without Dean's cue. They joined the crowd of dancers, and Anna smiled up at him. “You are good.”

“Would your own mother lie to you about a thing like that?” Dean guided her through an inside turn, avoiding the edge where Michael stood.

“If you play a decent game of golf that's both my parents won over.” Anna followed him through a promenade, neatly returning to his arms. “I want to apologize for our meeting at Lucas’s party. I could have been a lot more tactful. I didn't think about how you would feel.”

“Thank you, Anna.”

“Did you and Castiel fight?”
Dean shrugged. “We didn't throw things at each other. Wait. Do rich people throw things when they fight?”

Anna threw her head back with laughter. “I smashed plenty of crystal in my day, but I can't imagine Cas like that. He's very controlled.”

They passed Castiel and Hael, and Anna smiled at them like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. She watched Castiel for a lingering second. “He's worried. I know my brother. You put it off until after the wedding, didn't you?”

“It wasn't a good time to hash it out.”

“I hope you can forgive us,” Anna said. “He likes you. And it's been a long time.”

He'd heard the whispers. His presence at two weddings was a stone cast into a still pond and it wasn't just Tumblr watching them avidly. Castiel's beau was news for his people. Their simple arrangement had bigger consequences.

“We'll talk,” Dean promised, and escorted Anna back to their table. He spotted Michael's blond curls too late. He stood by their table, a short glass of smoky scotch that wafted far enough to make Anna's nose wrinkle.

“Dean. I'd like to talk to you.” Michael turned away without waiting for an answer.

Dean stared at his retreating back. Who the fuck was this asshole? He honestly expected that Dean would just follow him on command. What a--

Dean sighed and followed. He couldn't cause a big scene at Lucas's wedding. Castiel didn't hire him for that.

Michael guided them to a smaller room half-full of instrument cases, a pair of rolling coat racks filled with coats and garment bags. A man in a black suit nodded to Michael and left the room, presumably to stand just outside.

The carpet was patterned with interlocking squares. Dean kept three squares between them as he stopped. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“One hundred thousand dollars.”

Oh, shit. “What about it?”

He knew. He'd found out somehow. But why come to him about it? Did he think Dean would tell him the truth? Dean kept his expression neutral and a little confused.

Michael gusted out a whiskey-laden sigh and reached into his breast pocket. “Do you want it or not?”

He pulled out a check. Dean’s name was already on it. Michael had already signed it.

The amount was blank.

A red line of heat split over Dean's scalp. That bastard. It pulled his hands into fists. But he smiled, insolent and unkind. “No, thank you.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “Fine. Two hundred and fifty thousand.”
This was actually happening. He was standing here while Michael waved a check in his face and bartered what it would cost for Dean to go away. No. Fuck that. To hell with this guy.

Dean shrugged, the picture of boredom. “Well. If the check's blank, how about seventy-five million?”

Michael's eyes went round. “What?”

Dean smirked. “You wanna play this game? Fine. Let's play.”

“That's three hundred times what I offered.”

Dean slouched, disdainful as a cat. “There's a limit to what you're willing to do to save your brother from a heartless mercenary, then. Okay. Good to know.”

He plucked the check from Michael's hand. He unfolded it, and tore it down the middle. He slid the pieces together and tore them again to make four. Eight. Sixteen. Thirty-two. Confetti, scattering over the shiny toes of Michael's formal shoes.

“The truth is, this isn't the right time for this conversation,” Dean said. “Offer me go away money in a year, when I'm actually some kind of threat.”

He'd be long gone by then. Michael could keep his precious money.

Michael looked up from the strewn bits of paper. His forehead glistened. “You say that as if you aren't already dangerous.”

“I'm really not.”

“Oh yes you are,” Michael said. “You were supposed to be tempted. You were supposed to look hungry. You didn't even blink those striking green eyes. You want more than that.”

Dean faced down Michael's burning look with a sharp-edged smile. “I do.”

“What do you want?”

“A friend, Mr. Novak. And I think Castiel could use one, too.”

***

Where had Dean gone? Did he realize what a stir he'd made, dancing with Anna after she'd refused to step onto the floor to partner Michael for the bridal party dance? He couldn't know. No one told him. But Dean disappeared from the reception, and Michael wasn't in evidence either.

Castiel checked the men's restroom. Empty. He paced back to the dome room. He'd ask Anna. But her seat was empty too, the long flute she drank ginger ale from still fizzing. She hadn't been gone long. Maybe Dean was with Anna. A hard knot formed in Castiel's stomach. If he were, that would make things even worse.

He checked the dance floor, and there he was.

Dean danced with Mother and people made room for their high, elegant frame. They danced tall and graceful, Mother's face alight with joy as they worked through complex figures. By some intuition they even let go of their hold to dance side by side, spinning down the floor to meet and dance together again.
Mother would be so disappointed when they broke up in June.

Dad moved to stand next to his youngest son, his trademark pewter-gilt hair well past the collar of his tuxedo, his silvering beard neat and full. He watched Mother with ice blue eyes crinkled in a fond smile.

He elbowed Castiel. “We're going to have to break that up, or they're going to run away together.”

Castiel grinned at his father. “I'm ready if you are.”

The music came to a close and bystanders applauded Dean and Mother's dance. Castiel stepped forward to claim Dean.

“I hope you don't mind my cutting in.”

“It's about time, Cas.” The simmering anger and hurt Dean had shown two days ago was gone, covered by a gorgeous smile and a kiss on Castiel's cheek.

The music began again and Dean relaxed into Castiel's hold, content to follow his simple skills. Some people stared at the spectacle of two men dancing. Castiel ignored them. He had eyes only for Dean, who watched him back.

“Are you still angry?” Castiel asked.

“It's been a beautiful wedding so far.”

Did that mean yes? Castiel drew Dean a little closer, his lips near Dean's ear. “I'm sorry. How can I make it up to you?”

“Mmm.” The sound scuffed over Castiel's skin. Dean wore a lazy smile, the look in his eyes full of promises you couldn't keep with your clothes on. “Do you have any ideas?”

Every nerve on Castiel's skin woke up. His tongue flicked over his lips, and Dean watched that with smoky-eyed interest. Castiel gulped. He'd never seen Dean like this, like he could eat Castiel like air.

“Dean.” Castiel gripped his hand. “Tell me what's wrong.”

The seductive facade frayed on the edges. “Everything's fine.”

“No, it's not.” He knew Dean. Something was wrong. “It's not raining. Do you want to go for a walk?”

Dean stopped dancing. He glanced to his right, looked back, and nodded. “I need some fresh air.”

Castiel caught his hand and led him out of the hotel and onto Cherry Street, a narrow road with only one lane for cars. Dean walked fast, racing to get out of sight of the hotel. He ignored people on the street who looked twice, moving like he was ready to start running. He jerked up short, jaw clenched as the traffic lights ahead changed.

Castiel tugged on Dean's hand. “You're angry.”

Dean looked straight ahead. “Yeah.”

“What happened?”
Dean glanced at him. “Your brother...”

“Michael?”

Dean pressed his lips together.

“What’s he done this time?”

“Not here.” Dean jogged across the street, leading them into the shadows of a small greensward, the walk lined by tall scarlet oaks. Dean leaned against a lamp post and the light beat down on him, shadowing his eyes. He dropped the mask and Castiel reached for him.

“Dean.” What had Michael done? What had he done?

Dean took Castiel's hand, but he looked away. “Michael offered me an outrageous sum of money to abandon you.”

The ground shifted under Castiel's feet. “How much money?”

“It doesn't matter.”

“Tell me.”

He sighed. “Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“Oh.” He fought the spiny ball in his throat, tried to swallow it down. He braced himself for Dean's goodbye, his apology, whatever he was going to say.

Dean leaned his head back against the lamp post, bumping the back of his skull against the iron. “Just thinking about it makes me want to punch a plate glass window. Break something and pretend it's his face.” He lifted his head, and Castiel sucked down a gasp at the swirl of anger and hurt on his face. “How could he do that to you?”

Castiel blinked. “Did you...did you say no?”

“God damn it.” Dean's head thumped against the lamp post again. “Of course I said no. It's fucking insulting. The whole thing is offensive.”

He said no? “But I'm paying you less than that.”

Dean pushed himself off the post, hands on Castiel's shoulders. “That's not the point. I don't care, Cas. I don't care about the money. Keep it.”

“Dean--”

“I'm here.” Dean's fingers tightened. “You got that? I'm not going anywhere. You hired me to be your boyfriend, but fuck that. Fuck the contract. I'll be your friend for free.”
Castiel stared at him and didn't say a word. Of course he wouldn't. Castiel didn't want his friendship. He was a fool to even offer, to put Castiel on the spot like this. He'd take back the last five minutes, do it over, not tell Castiel any of it. He was supposed to be doing his job.

Castiel snapped back into focus. “We never anticipated this.”

This wasn't part of the plan. “Alright.”

Tiny stones lay scattered across the cobbled lane, each one casting shadows in the lamplight. Castiel lifted Dean's chin. “I would be honored to be your friend, Dean.”

He could breathe again. He took in the cool scent of new green leaves and wet earth. The ground firmed beneath his shoes.

Castiel stuck his hands in his pockets. “I should have told you that I knew, but I didn't want to embarrass you. That was wrong.”

“Did you feel sorry for me when you read about my life?”

“I imagined what it must have been like, getting caught stealing bread. Riding in the back of a patrol car, taken to jail—and the whole time, your little brother was hungry and waiting for you to come back.”

The old pain ripped through him, fresh as yesterday. “Cas--”

Castiel's fingers wound through his. Castiel had read a few lines in a background and saw the scariest night of his teenage life. His friend pulled him close and Dean let him stroke the line shaved across the back of his neck, where the hair grew in a soft fuzz.

Dean turned his face into the crook of Castiel's neck. “I never told anyone that.”

“It's yours to tell,” Castiel said. “I'm sorry about Michael.”

“Michael's an ass.”

“He really is.”

“What would he say to you, after I blew out of your life? Would he tell you what he did?”

Castiel's laugh shook them both. “He didn't before.”

Dean lifted his head from Castiel's shoulder. “What?”

“I was kind of a funny looking adolescent.”

“He set you up with dates?”

“He made them ask me without telling me that he'd put them up to it.”

“Seriously?”

“He was trying to help,” Castiel shrugged. “And I probably wouldn't have had dates without that
help. You never had trouble getting dates for homecoming or prom, did you.”

“No. I went with Rhonda Hurley.”

“Your high school sweetheart?”

She had wanted to be. “It was more complicated than that. But we messed around off and on for a couple of years.”

“I didn't have sex until I was twenty.”

Dean glanced up at the trees. “And you were in love and everything.”

“I was,” Castiel said.

“I was twenty when I first had sex with a guy.”

“Were you in love?”

“It was--”

“--More complicated than that.” Castiel studied him for a moment, his mouth poised on something he wasn't sure he should say.

“Yeah.”

They walked on, past wood and cast-iron benches, through the shadows of wind shivered oaks to the center, where two paths crossed one another. Dean stepped ahead of Castiel, who had stopped, face turned away from him.

“Cas?”

Castiel looked back. “Have you ever been in love, Dean?”

The question wound around Dean's ribs. “I don't know.”

Half of Castiel's mouth turned upward. “Trust me, Dean. When you're in love? You know.”

They all said that. “Maybe we should go back.”

“To the reception?” Castiel asked.

Bad idea. “And risk running into Michael?”

“Yeah, I don't want to do that either. Maybe we should just go to bed.”

It was Dean's turn to look away. “Are we the kind of friends who go to bed together, Cas?”

“We don't have to be.”

“I guess not.” Wind shivered through new spring leaves, suddenly cold. Dean stuck his hands in his pockets. “It's not what you wanted.”

“What I want now...is complicated.”

“Like Facebook complicated?” Castiel had hired him because he didn't want that. Stupid. He turned away, gazing up at the trees.
“I’m not supposed to want you.” Castiel's shoes scuffed over the loose gravel on the path. “You're not supposed to be in my thoughts. You're not supposed to distract me from work.”

“But I do.” Dean turned around.

“You fill my mind, Dean. I think of you often. When you left, I missed you. Did you go to your brother’s?”

“Ah,” Dean scratched the back of his head. “I checked into the Olympic. For the two day spa getaway. It was--”

“Expensive?”

Stupid. Childish. Immature. “I was mad.”

Castiel's laughter broke the band around Dean's chest. “I noticed the haircut. Did it feel good?”

“I never did a lot of that stuff before,” Dean said. “It felt great.”

“Then it was worth every cent.” Castiel held out his hand. “Let's go back.”

***

Dean had turned down a quarter of a million dollars to be his friend, and Castiel had no words for how that made him feel. They didn't speak going back to the hotel, but Dean's fingers wound around his. Their hands fit together so easily. They fell into step when they walked to the hotel, letting go only to walk through the front door. Dean's shoulder brushed against his as they waited for the elevator, and they shared a quick glance.

Dean's smile made Castiel want to feel the prickly velvet of his freshly shorn hair. He raised his hand and rubbed against the grain, lazy and slow. Dean stood up straight, but dipped his chin to let Castiel touch, leaning into him.

Violins played through ceiling mounted speakers in the elevator car and Frank Sinatra's voice came in over the lush orchestral sound.

“Hey,” Castiel said. “They're playing our song.”

Dean looked at him from the corner of his eye, lips upturned. “So it is our song?”

“Why not? It's a classic.”

Castiel wound his arms around Dean and moved in a simple box step, and Dean followed. The mirrored walls reflected Dean's smile into infinity. The doors opened, and Castiel traveled them out of the car, humming the melody. Dean picked it up and hummed the jazz trumpet that wove around Sinatra's vocals in counterpoint.

Castiel smiled up at him as they danced down the hall. He'd never forget this. They stopped at their room, and Dean's smile made his heart trip. “I want to kiss you.”

“You can kiss me,” Dean said.

“Inside.”

Dean dragged the keycard out of his jacket and shoved the door open. He backed into the dark room and their lips met before the door clicked shut. Dean opened his mouth, curled one hand
around Castiel’s neck and it was Castiel's turn to moan, to press closer.

His hand traced up the stiff front of Dean's shirt, pinched the silken end of Dean's tie. He tugged and the bow came free. Dean shrugged out of his jacket and Castiel unfastened the buttons on Dean's waistcoat. Dean's hands were on him now, pulling his tie open.

They levered their feet out of shiny black shoes and left a trail of clothing to the bed – jackets tossed on chairs, shirt studs scattered across the coffee table. Dean rained kisses over Castiel's mouth, and lowered himself to his knees, dragging down Castiel's trousers and boxer shorts.

“Dean.”

Dean turned his face up, half caught in shadow. “Let me.” The zipper sounded loud. Dean’s nails scraped over Castiel’s hips. A delighted smile bloomed on his face as Castiel’s cock bounced, heavy and hard. Fingers like warm silk wrapped around the shaft, aiming the head directly at his full, parted lips.

“You don’t have to--”

Dean ignored him and sucked the glans into his mouth.

Oh, God. “Dean.”

Dean sucked hard enough to hollow his cheeks, and his tongue slid wet and strong along the underside. Castiel bit down on a gasp. Dean’s gorgeous mouth curved around his dick sent a bolt of pleasure down low in his belly. Castiel curled his toes into the carpet and fought to stay still. A moan escaped him and Dean sighed, stroking Castiel’s hips.

Everything centered on his cock, surrounded by Dean’s warm, wet mouth and wicked tongue. Dean’s lips flexed, clamping tight as he swallowed. A greedy part of Cas wanted to lay hands on Dean’s head and take everything, fall into this unbelievable sensation and just come, feeling the rippling press of Dean’s tongue swallowing it all. Another moan slipped from him, another. Castiel spread his fingers through Dean’s hair and pushed deeper before he could get a grip on himself.

Dean chuckled as Castiel drew back.

“You’ll make me come.”

“Mhmm.” Dean’s agreement hummed along every inch, and then he pushed down to take Castiel deeper.

“Oh, fuck.” Resisting was agony. Dean was a champion, sliding closer and closer to taking all of him. What would that feel like? A shiver rolled down his back and it was enough to push him to the edge. His body tensed. Dean swallowed, and that was all Castiel could take.

“Dean.” His voice sounded so ragged. “Dean, I’m--”

He gasped for breath and shuddered, fingers clenched in Dean's hair as the climax wouldn’t stop, pleasure collecting on a long-held debt.

Dean drew his head back, his smile well-satisfied. Castiel lifted him to his feet and tasted himself on Dean's tongue. “That was...you’re…”

“Awesome?” Dean smirked.
Awesome,” Castiel agreed. He laughed, his head fizzy like a glass of champagne. “God, I feel--”

“Drunk?”

“Happy.”

Dean’s eyes glittered, holding stars. A pang echoed through Castiel, soft and exquisite. The slightest hint of stubble rasped under Castiel’s lips as the memory engraved itself.

“Your turn.”

***

Castiel knelt on the carpet between his spread legs, his breath warming Dean’s thighs as he skimmed his fingers over Dean’s belly. His fingertips traced over Dean’s ribs, circled the rose-brown tips of his nipples.

Oh, that wasn’t fair. Dean’s eyes fluttered closed as Castiel’s gentle circles made him moan, his erection twitching on his belly. Everything was sensitive, straining for attention, and Dean was torn between wanting to race to the end or let Cas have his way.

He raised his head, and Castiel watched him like he was drinking up every moment. Watching him. Dean shut his eyes with a groan, licked his lips, and Castiel’s quiet moan shot right to his brain.

“Feels good. Touch me.”

“I want to watch you come, Dean. Will you let me?”

“Fuck. Yes, watch me.” The corners of his mouth turned up. “I like that.”

“Touch yourself.”

Dean’s breathing sped up. “You like watching, Cas? Did you want to watch me take a bath in that hotel room with the glass wall?”

Castiel sucked in a breath. “Yes.”

“We should go back. Do everything you wanted to watch me do.” Until Castiel had to touch Dean, open him up and get inside. Fuck, yes. He liked to watch.

Dean had something to show him.

He curled his hands around his cock, drawing the foreskin back and caressing the exposed glans with light fingers, spreading the fluid that leaked over the tip. He teased slippery fingers over the sensitive bumps, gasping, and raised his fingers to his lips.

“Oh fuck, Dean.”

Dean licked his fingers, gliding them over his mouth. Castiel radiated arousal. He watched Dean, wanted him--it went straight to Dean’s head. He spread his legs wider. “Help me.”

“Do you want my fingers?”

“Yes.”

Castiel pulled open the nightstand drawer.
Dean raised his hips. “Get in me. Hurry.”

Warm, slippery fingers nudged him, circling and firm. Dean relaxed, sighing when one finger slipped inside, Cas’s finger flexed, sought deeper until Dean jolted from the touch, the shock of feeling still intense enough to surprise him, time and time again. “There!”

Castiel kissed the inside of Dean’s thigh and pushed two fingers deep, curved them up. Perfect, so fucking good—

Dean groped for his cock, fingers rippling near the head. Castiel’s fingers pushed against his prostate like a pulse. He was going to come, just from this.

“Dean,” Castiel whispered. “Oh, Dean. You’re beautiful.”

“Cas,” Dean’s voice was hoarse. “Watch me.”

“I’m watching. You’re gorgeous. Open your eyes.”

Dean licked his lips and opened his eyes. Castiel watched as Dean slowly came undone. Looking back peeled the layers between them away. Dean couldn’t hide by being on display. Castiel wanted him here, not in a hazy fantasy. Right here, where he bucked his hips on Castiel’s stiff fingers. Where Castiel saw everything he did and felt on his face, with nowhere to hide.

Dean had never felt so naked in his life. “Cas?”

“You are incredible. Look at me. Don’t look away.” His fingers thrust faster. “I want to see you.”

Feeling completely exposed made the tension and the pleasure something more, made it tighter, harder. His eyes squeezed shut, but he opened them again to the awed look on Castiel’s face.

His ass canted right off the bed as the tension snapped and the orgasm took over. He gasped for air, shaking and breathless, not sure if it was over.

He was fuzzy with bliss, utterly relaxed but still thrumming through all his limbs. Euphoria washed over him, melting all of his muscles.

“Incredible,” Castiel said. “That was--”

“--Awesome,” Dean said with a shaky laugh. “Did you bring condoms?”

Castiel sighed. “No.”

“Damn. Get some in the morning?”

“After the breakfast? Absolutely.” Cas stood up. “Don’t move. I’ll get a cloth.”

He washed Dean himself and slid into bed. Dean cuddled right into him, kissing his neck and shoulders while Castiel tickled his back. “That was fun. Let’s do it again.”

Castiel kissed Dean’s hair. “Now?”

“Heh. No.”

***

They spent the night in a lazy tangle of limbs and woke up clasped together, Castiel curled around
Dean’s back.

“Cas?”

“Dean.” Castiel’s arm tightened around his middle, and he kissed Dean’s shoulder. “Mmm.” He was still half asleep. Warm and boneless and content.

“It’s time to wake up.” Dean kissed his forehead. “We never set an alarm. It’s nine o’clock.”

Castiel rolled over on his back. “Shit. Can’t I give her the piano tomorrow?”

“Nope.” Dean shoved at his shoulder.

“But I could stay here, and we could…” Castiel raised his head, kissing Dean’s shoulder.

“Nice try,” Dean said, and rolled himself into all the blankets like a burrito. “I’ll probably be right here when you get back.”
Castiel didn’t want to go to breakfast. He dressed, pausing to crawl back on the bed and kiss Dean, who would remind him that he had to go and give Sarah her piano. Dean finally got out of bed, enticing him to the door with kisses and all but shoved him out, promising that he’d be ready when Castiel came back. The breakfast and gift opening would only take ninety minutes.

This was going to be forever.

Lucas broke out of the knot of cousins to meet Castiel as he walked into the breakfast room. “Good morning, brother.” He slapped Castiel on the shoulder, a knowing smile spread over his face. “You’re glowing.”

“Shut up,” Castiel said, but he couldn’t help smiling.

“ Took you long enough,” Lucas said. “How long ‘til you move in together?”

“Will you stop.” Castiel’s face was hot.

“Castiel, is my husband tormenting you?” Sarah kissed Castiel’s cheek and cuddled one arm around him. “Where’s Dean?”

“He’s upstairs, probably getting some more sleep.”

“Castiel wore him out,” Lucas grinned.

Sarah swatted Lucas’s shoulder. “You’re terrible. Leave your brother alone. I’m sorry. He’s just so pleased with Dean. You should have brought him for breakfast.”

“It’s just supposed to be family,” Castiel said.

“Castiel is correct.”

Michael was all the way through a mimosa, only a dab of champagne and orange juice in the bottom of his glass. “At least he’s showing restraint in that regard.”

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Oh, please, Mikey. We owned video stores. Quit acting like you’re a Daughter of the American Revolution.”

Michael ignored the jibe. “We’ve had quite enough trouble in this family with unsuitable partners, Lucas. We barely escaped tragedy with Anna—”

“Anna’s fine.” Castiel rounded on Michael, staring him down. “My relationship with Dean is my business. Keep your nose and your checkbook out of it.”

“Of course he tattled to you.” The disdain on Michael’s face made Castiel’s hands clench into fists. “I should have anticipated that. He’s just trying to drive a wedge between us. It’s manipulative.”

“You offer Dean a quarter of a million dollars to leave me, and he’s the one who’s manipulative?” Lucas’s mouth spread in a grimace. “Michael, really. How tacky.”

Michael flinched as if he’d been stung. “He’s after more than that, Castiel.”
“Oh Michael. I love your logic,” Castiel growled. “If Dean had taken the money, he’s a greedy slut who doesn’t care about me, but since he didn’t take the money, he’s a greedy slut who wants more than a crummy quarter million. And still doesn’t care about me. Thanks.”

“It’s a scandal, Castiel. Just like—” he shut his mouth and stared over Castiel’s shoulder.

Anna’s red hair was unpinned, tumbling freely over the shoulders of her lilac cashmere twinset. An amethyst twinkled at her throat, matching the princess cut square on her ring finger.

“Michael.” Anna’s smile was more a baring of teeth. “Would you please be quiet. You’re causing a scene.”

Michael’s nostrils flared, but he nodded. “This was inappropriate, Sarah. I apologize.”

He turned away, taking his place at the table. Castiel took Anna’s arm, squeezed her hand. “Sorry. He thinks he’s protecting the family.”

“Don’t make excuses for him, Castiel. I know what he thinks he’s doing. Do you want me to keep Dean entertained while you’re working?”

“I thought you were going to drill him on media interaction.”

“Oh, I am.” Anna waited for Castiel to pull out her chair, smoothing the back of her cream skirt as she sat down. “But I meant for fun. We could go to the movies, out for dinner, that sort of thing.”

“He has a brother here in town, working as a first year associate at—”

“Spengler and Zeddmore,” Anna said. “I did read the background.”

Castiel sighed and poured them each some orange juice. “That goddamned background. Dean nearly left me over that.”


“I should have told him,” Castiel said. “So it's not really your fault. He should have already known.”

“You always did try to cover for my mistakes.” Anna laid her hand on Castiel's. The ring glittered. Castiel lifted her hand and grinned.

“What's this, little sister? Are you secretly engaged?”

She smirked. “If I am, wouldn't that be a secret?”

“Good point. But you'd tell me, wouldn't you?”

“If I had news like that, you would be the first to know.”

That was an evasion, but his little sister had a right to her secrets. “Dean cooks.”

“I heard from Lucas.” Anna leaned back and let the waiter set a plate of fruit and quiche in front of her. “He likes your apartment.”

“You should come to dinner.”

“Are you volunteering your boyfriend to cook for us?” Anna speared a grape with her fork.
“I’ll get takeout. But come to dinner.” He waited until Anna swallowed her grape before he lowered his voice and added, “Bring Bela.”

Her wide eyes told him he’d hit the mark.

***

Dean lasted twenty minutes before he rolled out of bed and headed for the shower. Check-out was at noon, and he wasn’t going to be interrupted by housekeeping when he got Castiel back in bed. Besides, they were going to be a while. Dean smiled to himself. A long while.

He was combing his hair when his phone chimed an alert for his email. Aunt Ellen had sent him a message that read, there are such things as telephones. Use yours!

He should call, but there was no way he was gonna do that while he sprawled about perfumed and naked, waiting for Castiel to come back. He put on a pair of khakis and a salmon pink golf shirt, stuck his bare feet in yesterday’s oxfords. He studied the effect in the mirror and his reflection smiled wryly. He looked like one of Castiel’s moneyed tribe, and not like himself at all.

But he could call Aunt Ellen and not die of shame. He dialed, and she answered on the second ring.

“Hello.”

“Aunt Ellen.” He walked to the window, answering a smile that bloomed 1200 miles away.

“Dean Winchester, you call your aunt Ellen when you get into a romance with a handsome man. What did I teach you?”

Dean laughed. “I’m sorry, Aunt Ellen. It just kind of happened.”

“I saw you in People magazine in the supermarket. Sioux Falls is on its ear.”

“I’ve had my picture taken a few times. Were we in tuxedos?”

“You’re dancing together.”

Dean blinked. “They got pictures of Michael and Hael's wedding?” Michael wasn't going to like that.

“Doesn’t look like a wedding to me. It looks like a skating rink.”

Robson Square. “That was our first date, back in March. People took pictures of us way back then?”

“Way back then. Listen to you. It’s hardly been a month.”

Really? It seemed longer. “Yeah, I guess that's true.”

Paper crackled. “You should also call your aunt when you get major television roles, young man. It says you're soon to appear on Motive.”

“Oh, yeah, that's in May. They had my name?” Dean opened his laptop and googled ‘dean winchester people magazine.’ That was him and Castiel, dancing and smiling at each other. Huh!

“I thought you were still dating Linus.”

Aunt Ellen had been approving of Dean dating a fireman. A little shard of guilt poked him. “It was
kind of sudden, aunt Ellen.”

“You said something about a wedding?”

“Yeah, that was our second date.” Dean picked up their tuxedo jackets, hung them up, figured out whose trousers were whose. “Castiel's twin brothers and his best friend are all getting married this spring.”

“That's a lot of weddings. Especially if you bring him to Sam and Jess's.”

“I asked him to come.” Castiel didn't have to do that, but Dean had asked him anyway.

“And you're in Seattle right now?”

Dean picked up a pair of stiff-front shirts. “Yeah. The other brother got married last night. Cas is at the bride's breakfast.”

“You seem distracted.”

“There are tuxedo bits all over the suite—oh,” Dean's face got hot. “Sorry, Aunt Ellen. I shouldn't have said that.”

Aunt Ellen laughed. “You're not going to turn any more of my hair gray, boy. I'm glad you're having fun.”

“Still. There are lines.”

“I don't suppose you know if this is serious yet?”

Part of Dean ran screaming at this turn in the conversation, and the rest of him wanted to follow. “It's too early to say.”

There was something between them, and it was strung tight and sweet, pulling them together even though they shouldn't let it.

“Sam says there is.”

“Aunt Ellen.”

“Your voicemail's full, so I called him when I saw that picture this morning.”

“My Vancouver number's mailbox is full?” Dean frowned. A desktop alert for gmail flashed long enough to display a blank subject. Dean's heart kicked in his chest.

“I thought it was strange too. What do you mean, your Vancouver number?”

Dean opened his old gmail account. His inbox was stacked with emails, but he clicked on the folder marked M Masters. “I have a Seattle number too. I'm down here so much, it made sense.”

“Isn't that expensive? It's got to be another fifty dollars a month. And if you're in Seattle, then you're not--”


“Dean, how are you covering your bills if you're down in Seattle all the time?”
“Motive was a four-day call, Aunt Ellen. That's bills for two months right there.”

He clicked on the newest message from castielslady, waiting for the hotel wi-fi to spit out the image file she used instead of just typing the text into the email box.

“Dean. Castiel's got a lot of money, doesn't he?”

The picture was blue—no, it was the sky, billowing with clouds stamped with a digital watermark: Google maps. It loaded line by line, showing the tip of a red-shingled roof.

He held his breath as the picture loaded. It can't be. It can't--

Bile rose in his throat as yellow paint and white sills displayed, most of the building hidden behind juniper hedges.

His house. Castielslady had sent him a picture of his house.

“Dean?”

His voice shook. “I'm sorry, Aunt Ellen. I gotta go.”

***

The longest bride's breakfast in the world ended at last. Sarah thanked him for the piano and Castiel stopped long enough to hug a few cousins, but he was out the door in a heartbeat. The elevator took its sweet time getting up to the 8th floor. Castiel dodged a housekeeping cart and sidestepped breakfast trays left out in the hall. Maybe they should wait. Go home, dump their suitcases in a corner and chase each other up the stairs to the bedroom.

Yes. Dean in his bed, sprawled over the oyster and indigo bedding like in his own private dreams, the afternoon light shining on dappled freckles. He could wait for that. He slid his keycard into the slot and the light flashed green.

Packed suitcases rested in the foyer. Castiel stepped past them, coming to a halt in the suite's living room. Dean stood near the windows, head bowed as he talked on his cell phone. He turned around and Castiel's hands went cold.

“What happened?”

Dean spoke into the phone. “He's here.” He held his phone out. Castiel took it, but he pulled Dean into the crook of his arm, and Dean let him do it without protest. He even leaned on Castiel for a moment.

“This is Castiel. Who is this?”

“It's Inias. Dean received an email with a google maps image of his home in Burnaby today.”

Castiel squeezed Dean tight. “Was it from Margaret?”

“It appears to be. We're waiting for a contractor to verify that she's at home.”

Dean tried to pull away, but Castiel held on. “Do you think she left?”

“She's active on Twitter, responding to animosity over her views on your relationship.”

“Put me on hold and check with the contractor.”
“I’ve got to get back there.” Dean bit his knuckle. “What if she goes to the house? The guys don’t know anything about this. They could be in danger.”

“Inias is pretty sure she’s still in Oregon,” Castiel said. “He’s just checking now.”

“What do I do? The guys never signed up for this. They’ve got to get out of there, we’ve got to move. Kevin’s mom is going to flip her wig and make him come home.”

The hold music cut off. “She’s there,” Inias said. “The investigator knocked on her door with a misdelivered pizza. She answered.”

Dean sagged next to him. Castiel held tight, pressed his lips behind Dean’s ear. “Keep tabs on her. I want to know if she leaves town.”

“I can offer a contract. How long do you want her watched?”

“Let’s start with the week and see what happens,” Castiel said.

“Dean needs to put his local police force on notice. He should stay in Seattle, visibly in Seattle, to sap the incentive of going to his home.”

“How do you want me to be visible?” Dean asked.

“You haven’t been posting pictures to your social media,” Inias said. “I think it’s time for a comeback. We can advise you on online fan interactions—”

Dean hooked his thumb into one of Castiel’s belt loops. “I’m supposed to meet with Anna on Monday.”

“For today, take a selfie somewhere distinctive and post it,” Inias said. “The hotel you’re in is a landmark. That would be a good place to start.”

“Okay.” Dean stood up straight, his arm around Castiel’s back easy. “Thanks, Inias.”

“It’s my job.”

Dean smiled. “Even so. Cas. You want to be in some selfies?”

***

Dean's stomach roiled as he smiled for the camera. They took the picture in the dome room, arms draped across each other’s shoulders and smiling. Dean labeled it “At the Arctic Club in Seattle.” He sent it, and his phone buzzed with the first like before they made it back to the elevator.

His tongue was sandpaper. “There, our duty is done. What next, the Space Needle?”

“If you like.” Castiel's thumb stroked across the back of his hand, and it helped a little. He'd been right to be worried. Castielslady wasn't anywhere near his house, but she could do a lot of damage from afar, from prank pizzas to reporting his address as a marijuana grow-op.

He needed to warn his roommates. He had to make sure they were okay. He'd be safe, and he'd do what Inias said but he couldn't just leave them.

He halted, and Castiel turned a curious look at him. “You okay?”

A sour lump lodged in his throat, and his voice broke with trying to speak around it. “I have to go
“Inias said--”

“--I can’t just...hang out in Seattle while who knows what is happening to the guys. They’re probably up to their eyes in prank pizza.”

Castiel rubbed Dean’s shoulder. “Inias is an expert, Dean. And I don’t mind having you.”

“I need to make sure they’re okay. I won’t believe it until I see them.”

Castiel searched his face and nodded. “Then let's go.”

Warmth spread over Dean’s chest. “Cas. You don’t have to—”

“And leave you alone? I won’t do it.” Castiel stepped into the elevator. “You have to contact the police anyway. Let’s go up to Vancouver today. Make sure everything is fine, get all your statements done up there, and then we’ll come back.”

“We?”

“I’m not leaving you alone.” Castiel grasped Dean’s shoulders and looked into his eyes. “You’re in this position because of me. You don’t have to shoulder it by yourself.”

“I can handle it, Cas.”

“I know you can. But why carry it all if you don’t have to?” He reached up and stroked Dean’s face. “Anna can wait to train you. We’re going to Vancouver.”

Dean swallowed. “I don’t know if you can find a hotel on short notice. But if you don’t mind, you can stay with me. My place isn’t as nice as yours—”

“I’d be happy to.” Castiel’s fingers were warm and dry, feather-soft against Dean’s cheek. “I’d like to meet your roommates.”

“Okay.” Dean led the way to their suite. “I guess we’d better check out, huh?”

They grabbed their suitcases and looked for stray items left behind, but they were downstairs in ten minutes. Elegant, well-dressed Novaks gathered in the lobby to tell Lucas and Sarah goodbye.

Sarah spotted Dean and beckoned him over, planting a kiss on Dean’s cheek that didn’t budge her coral lipstick. “You should have come to breakfast.”

He smiled for her. She didn't need to know about his troubles. “That's okay. I got to sleep in. Have fun in Tahiti, Sarah.”

Lucas gave him a one-armed hug, patting his shoulder. “We’re going to have a housewarming party when we get back. I’ll see you then.”

Dean laughed. “I’ll bring you a spider plant cutting. Even bet no one will copy me.”

Lucas and Sarah disappeared into a ribboned and flowered white limo. Just married, the sign on the back read. Dean turned around and nearly collided with Castiel’s father, earning a hard stare from Michael.

“Sorry about that.” Dean hadn’t ever talked to Cain Novak beyond hello. Honestly he was kind of
intimidating but if Castiel’s hair went silver that way, he would be just too handsome.

But Mr. Novak took his hand and shook it. “Castiel tells me you’ve got trouble with a fan of his.”

“Yes, Sir. She found my address.”

“And that in spite of professional advice, you’re running up home anyway, and Castiel is coming with you.” Mr. Novak arched a single eyebrow at him, a gesture Castiel also shared.

“Yes, Sir. I was going to take a bus up, but Cas—Castiel insisted. I’m grateful he’s coming with me.”

“Surely this is something Castiel doesn’t really need to attend,” Michael said.

“I’m going with Dean.” Castiel’s mouth set in a thin line.

Michael’s mouth matched Castiel’s. “Very well.”

Mr. Novak eyed them. “It’s too bad. I was going to invite you to play a round of golf while Castiel was working too hard.”

“I haven’t played in a few years, but I’d enjoy that.”

Mr. Novak clapped his shoulder. Michael clenched his teeth. “Good lad. Looking forward to seeing your game. Castiel, we’ll see about dinner with your mother when we’re all back.”

“The car’s here. We have to go.” Castiel led Dean to the Tesla waiting for them at the front door.
Photographs

Castiel broke a law or two on the way north. There was enough open highway to let the Tesla have her head, and Dean's nail biting spurred him to drive faster, using all the techniques he'd learned at racing camp. He slowed to a demure 55 when they came up to the border, showing their passports.

“I don't know why I thought you'd have a Canadian passport.”

Dean put the navy blue and gold book inside his leather jacket. “Just a work permit. I'm short on hours this year, though. They might not renew it.”

They drove through the main street of Cloverdale at a crawl, yielding to a procession of riders on horseback crossing the street. “What will you do if that happens?”

Dean shifted in his seat. “Student visa, I guess.”

It would be his fault if that happened. “So you might be in a bad situation?”

Dean touched his arm. “Hey. I said yes.”

“I never meant to make things worse.” He'd brought trouble to Dean. He had to fix it. He would fix it.

“It's okay. I'll be okay.” He pointed out the window. “Take westbound on the Fraser Highway, or you'll get stuck on a toll road.”

Castiel patted the console between their seats. “I have a pass. I'm up here pretty often.”

Dean pried his phone apart, a SIM card balanced on his knee. “Okay, then just keep going.”

“How many hours do you need to keep your permit?”

“Don't worry about it.”

“It'll be my fault if you lose it.”

“I don't want you to schmooze me into jobs, Cas. It wouldn't be right.” He waited for his phone to boot up, and swore. “Son of a bitch! A hundred and nine missed calls!”

The phone in his hand vibrated. He refused the call without even looking at it.

“She published your phone number?”

“She must have.” Dean thumped his head against the cushioned headrest. “I've got to change it. I'll never get everyone updated.”

Castiel took one hand off the wheel and stroked Dean's knee. “We'll take care of it.”

But Dean went quiet, watching out the window.

Castiel followed the navigation instructions and pulled into Dean's driveway. His house was a yellow midcentury bungalow in the middle of a quiet street. The lawn was bumpy, the flowerbeds weedy, and the house needed a fresh coat of paint. The carport held a late model economy Toyota and a maroon Ford Focus.
“Am I stealing anyone's parking spot?”

“No,” Dean said. “But you'll have to move it if Kevin wants to get out.”

He opened his door and got out of the car, and Castiel followed him up cracked concrete tiles to the front door. Dean lived here, sharing the rent with three other men. This wasn't a cute TV situation like Friends. A pang of guilt pierced Castiel's chest. How could Dean have said no to Castiel's offer?

How did he say no to Michael?

Dean found a key and turned it in the front door lock. “I know it's not the Rosewood.”

“It's your home.” Castiel touched Dean's shoulder. “Thank you for inviting me.”

Dean nodded and pushed the door open and hollered, “Who's home?”

Muffled voices called back from elsewhere in the house.

“Sounds like everybody.” He toed out of his shoes, so Castiel did the same.

“Living room.” Dean waved at a wooden-floored room with an old green couch, draped with a blanket made of colourful squares. The chairs and the lamps didn't match. A vase of orange lilies sat in the center of a brass and glass coffee table, adding to the riot of color.

Dean moved past it and into a dining room. Dice, pens, and half empty bowls of chips cluttered the surface of a long table of knotty pine, bearing the remains of an RPG session. A framed poster for the movie Akira hung on one wall, and the built in sideboard was filled with gaming sourcebooks.

Dean gave the abandoned scene a sour look. “Hey!” he shouted. “Did you guys play Shadowrun without me?”

He moved past it into a kitchen that hadn't been remodeled since the 50's. It was a study in pink – the original fridge and stove still in residence, the knife-scarred countertops pink and gold laminate. Stacks of unwashed dishes rested next to the sink, and a breakfast nook held a pile of unsorted mail.

Dean picked up a milk-filmed glass and sighed.

Footsteps thundered up a set of stairs and a young asian man burst into the kitchen. “It was a backstory session, just a one shot, no Karma. Oh, hey.”

“This is Castiel. Cas, meet Kevin. He's the baby of the house.”

“Hi.” He waved at Castiel. Castiel smiled back.

Dean opened the fridge and the door shelves were lined with bottles of beer, the interior mostly empty. “Has everything been okay here?”

“Sure, fine.” Kevin ran the water in the sink. “Sorry about the dishes, we kind of backslid--”

“No weird phonecalls to the house line, no rogue pizza deliveries?”

“Nothing.” Kevin's eyebrows knit together, then raised with memory. “Wait, the flowers. Those came for you.”
A trickle of cold crawled up Castiel's neck. “Did the flowers come with a card? A message?”

“No card,” Kevin said. “That's weird, right? I thought it was weird.”

“Orange lilies.” Castiel fished for his phone.

Dean watched him open Google. “That mean something to you?”

He tapped, slid his finger over the keyboard. Maybe he misremembered. Maybe he was wrong.

“Have you heard of the language of flowers?”

Dean glared at the flowers, a vertical line between his brows. “Like roses mean love, stuff like that?”

“Exactly. It's a plot device on *Grosvenor Lane*. Flowers are an important part of the symbolism and the visual subtext...”

“Cas?”

Castiel pressed his lips together. He hadn't been wrong, after all.

“It's a message,” Castiel said. “Orange lilies are a symbol of hatred.”

***

Dean knew who sent them. She could order flowers on the internet. He sent flowers to Aunt Ellen every May. It was easy, if a little expensive.

“What's happening?” Kevin asked. “Why were you expecting a pizza bombing?”

“A jealous fan found Dean's contact information,” Castiel said.

Kevin gaped, then crossed the kitchen to open the basement door. “Guys! Family meeting, right now.”

Music went silent. “Family meeting?”

“Now!” Kevin left the door open and retrieved beer from the fridge.

Just looking at a beer bottle made his stomach lurch. “If I drink that I will hurl.”

“There's Aaron's ginger ale.”

“Gimme that. Cas?”

“Ginger ale, please.”

Aaron appeared at the entrance to the kitchen, looking sheepish. “Sorry about the bathroom. Don't touch the clamps. I think it'll stick if we leave it for a few days.”

Kevin used his shirttail to protect his hand while opening the bottle. “Dean has a crazy stalker and she knows where we live.”

“What? Stalker, what?” Chuck emerged from the basement, wearing a wrinkled Sailor Moon t-shirt. “Dean. I forgot a load of clothes in the laundry. Baking soda got the smell out but you might want to use some if you've got a load to—oh my God.”
Chuck stared open-mouthed at Castiel.

Dean caught hold of the urge to laugh hysterically and strangled it. “Guys, this is Castiel Novak. You met Kevin, this is Aaron, and the terrified one is Chuck.”

“Hi.” Aaron opened a beer bottle and handed it to Chuck, who gulped down three big swallows without blinking. “Don’t mind Chuck. He’s a television writer. Now what’s this about a stalker?”

“Is this about all those pictures of you on tumblr?” Kevin asked.

“Yeah.” Dean drank his ginger ale, wetting his tongue. “There’s this woman, Margaret, she thinks Cas is in love with her.”

“Oh holy crap,” Kevin said. “And you’re stealing her man, so she doxxed you?”

“Exactly. My phone’s useless. She printed my number online.”

“The address?”

Dean glanced at the flowers. “I think she kept that to herself.”

“How do you know she has it?” Aaron set his beer down and leaned next to the oven. He set his hand near a burner and lifted it, nose wrinkled in disgust.

“She sent me an email with a Google maps image of the house.”

Kevin moved aside to let Aaron get at the sink. “And she probably sent you the flowers.”

“We thought that was weird—excuse me.” Chuck cleared his throat and went on in his normal tone of voice. “Like, who would send you flowers? Besides Castiel, but you were with him.”

“There wasn’t a card? Anything?” Dean asked.

Aaron stuck his hands in hot water. “Nothing.”

“The flowers were the message, I believe,” Castiel said.

Dean moved to a cupboard and grimaced when he found it empty. “Are there any clean glasses?”

Aaron picked up a beer glass and held it under the faucet. “Coming up.”

Castiel gave Dean a reassuring smile. “I can drink out of a can, I won’t melt.”

“About the house. We didn’t think you’d be back until tomorrow,” Aaron said.

Dean stared them all down. “And so you all lived like savages.”

It wasn’t that they were untidy—or that Sam was untidy. But it was shabby. Dean remembered gleaming countertops with matching black and stainless appliances at Castiel’s place, thought of Sam’s tiny place, and this house—

Dean moved to the step can. “Be right back, I’ve gotta take out the garbage.”

“Don’t lift a finger. We’ll do it all.” Chuck was still a little wide-eyed. “We were going to anyway. And if we’d known we would have—”

Chuck probably wanted to disappear, poor guy. Dean turned and sat down at the kitchen table. “I
know. Are you watching the game?”

“We were playing Bloodborne.”

“Bastards. How far ahead are you?”

“Pretty far,” Kevin admitted. “No spoilers though.”

Dean surveyed the wreckage of the kitchen. Of course it had to be a sty when he brought Castiel home. “Fridge is empty. What were you going to eat for dinner?”

Aaron and Chuck looked at each other. Kevin spoke up. “Indian. Twenty each?”

Dean reached into his wallet and pulled out a scarlet fifty dollar bill. “Done. Cas and me, we’re going for a ride tonight. I mean to take Baby out to see some stars. Is the basement a tragedy?”

“Kind of.”

Dean sighed. “I’m sorry, Cas. Do you want to look for a hotel?”

“It’s fine,” Castiel said. “Really. What can I do to help?”

“Don’t you dare,” Aaron cleared the kitchen table, wiping the top clean. He pulled out a padded, chrome legged chair and invited Castiel to sit. “My mother would die of shame to know that I allowed a guest to clean up after me just so he could have a place to sit—”

“Your mother would start cleaning as soon as she saw this.”

“And I wouldn’t be able to show my face for a week. We should have kept up on it, Dean, we should have.”

“We were going to play part two of that mini-adventure—nevermind.” Chuck disappeared into the dining room to clean up gaming detritus.

Kevin dried dishes with a flour sack towel and put them away. “Can you decide what to order, Dean?”

Dean got up and sorted through the drawer full of paper delivery menus. “Yeah. Gimme your phone.”

“Why can’t you use—they published your number.”

“I can’t even turn it on. I’ll have to call Telus and ask them if I can get my phone number changed. Cas. Any favorites?”

“Chicken vindaloo.”

“It’ll be hot, this is Burnaby,” Aaron warned.

“Then I’ll like it.” Castiel leaned one elbow on the table. “Are you guys good on beer, should we run to the store?”

“There’s plenty,” Aaron said. “Just relax.”

“Do me a favor? Throw those flowers out.”
“We can’t,” Castiel said. “They’re evidence.”

Fuck. Dean made a strangled noise of frustration. “I should call them. I should call Telus. Kevin, can I use your phone again?”

“Go ahead.” Kevin waved a soggy dish towel in assent.

Dean nodded and got to his feet, nodding at Castiel. “Do you want to unpack anything?”

“I should hang my shirts.”

“Come with me.”

***

Dean refused to look at the lilies on the table but the scent of waxy petaled flowers followed them down a badly lit hallway.

“So this is the upstairs bathroom.” Dean opened a door and turned on the light.

It was the bathroom from Dean’s shaving selfie. They kept up the original aqua theme, a design color that had come back into style. The room was long and narrow, and the evidence on the bathroom counter suggested that it was shared by all four men.

Dean kept his eyes on the floor. “Keep holding the handle down or you won’t get a full flush. And, ah, the corner of the counter comes loose once every few months, and Aaron swears he’s fixed it every time.”

A pair of clamps held down the corner of the laminate countertop. A piece of the flashing was entirely missing, showing the pressed layers of vintage plywood that lived beneath gold-flecked aqua laminate.

Dean wouldn’t look at him. “I’ll find you some towels from the linen closet—”

He was ashamed of his house. Ashamed of the disrepair, the age, the evidence that they had to fix things rather than replace them.

No. He was ashamed to let Castiel see them. This was his fault.

“Dean.”

He shrugged.

Castiel raised his chin with gentle fingers. “It’s okay.”

“You’ve never lived like this.”

Words didn’t sink in with Dean as much as touch did. Castiel stroked his shoulder, watched Dean tilt his head to make more room for the touch. “It doesn’t change anything, Dean. It only means you’re resourceful. Let’s see your room.”

Dean stood still an instant longer for Castiel’s hand to slide off his shoulder. “It’s this way.”

Dean took him by the hand and tugged him down a badly lit hall and into a bedroom that faced the back of the house. He snapped on the overhead light and cleared space in his closet.
It was a small room, most of the space taken by a double bed shoved in a corner and a desk at the foot of it. Dean could watch TV and movies on the wide LCD monitor, but he had to sit at the foot of the bed to use the computer. A tall shelf filled with DVDs perched next to the desk, and hanging above the monitor was an oversized photographic print of Central Park, surrounded on all sides by the city.

The color photograph above the head of Dean’s bed was more interesting. It was of Dean and his brother Sam leaning on the nose of a sleek black-and-chrome vintage car, the blue and orange painted steel of the Patullo Bridge just beyond.

“Aaron took that picture.”

The print of New York, anyone could have that. “It’s fantastic. And that’s Baby, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. You want to take her for a drive tonight?”

“Where would we go?”

Dean shrugged. “Just to look at stars. I haven’t taken her out yet this year, and her insurance is coming up in June.”

“I’d like to go for a drive,” Castiel said. “Who's this?”

He pointed at a photo of a middle aged couple in high waders standing on either side of a beautiful blonde woman in low cut jeans and a high cut t-shirt. An ex-girlfriend?

“That’s Uncle Bobby, Aunt Ellen, and my cousin Jo at the cabin in Whitefish. We share it, but they go up the most.”

Tension in his shoulders un-knotted. “Your cousin.”

“Well, technically they’re no relation, but we grew up with them, so they’re family.” He touched the corner of a photograph of Sam in a robe and mortarboard. “This one’s Sammy at graduation. Summa Cum Laude.”

“Great work.” Castiel touched the frame of a boy in a baseball uniform, bat held at the ready. “Who’s this?”

“That’s Adam. Our baby brother. Baseball scholarship, did you guess?”

Dean had so many smiles. This one was fondness and pride in his family, soft and a little private. He pointed at a smaller photograph, yellow with age. “That’s my mom.”

Dean was in the picture too, sitting on his mother’s lap with a picture book. Castiel studied her face, saw Dean in the shape of her eyes and cheekbones, in the lush fullness of her lips.

“She’s beautiful.”

“Sometimes I still miss her.” Dean had to push the words out just to sound above a whisper.

“You never stop missing them.”

Dean took his offered arm, leaning into Castiel’s side. He curled his arm around Dean’s waist, ignored Dean’s rapid blinks. “Sometimes it just hits you out of nowhere.”
They stood in front of Dean’s wall of family until Dean pointed to another frame. “This is my Dad, and Kate. That’s Jess, in the picture with Sam. This one is of me and Uncle Rufus, fishing. Those are all the guys. And—that’s my room.”

Castiel looked over the collection of frames. He had family photographs archived in his computer network. Dean lived with the faces of his family held close, kept in his personal living space. No girlfriends. No boyfriends. Had any of them earned a place there?

Castiel didn’t want to ask. What if someone had?

What if no one had?

“Sorry about Chuck,” Dean said. “You took him by surprise.”

“He’s a writer?”

“He’s written a ton of scripts for this show idea he has, but he never shows them to anyone but us.”

Just writing one script was a feat. What was ‘a ton?’ “What’s the most striking thing about his work?”

“The themes,” Dean said. “On the surface it’s two brothers in plaid shirts grifting across America to hunt monsters. But it’s about family, about revenge, about fate and destiny.”

Castiel’s eyebrows rose. That was a hell of an elevator pitch. “Is there a role in it you’d like to do?”

Dean shook his head. “I’m aged out of the main roles. They’re 22 and 26. There’s a character later in the series, like closer to the end of the arc, I’d love to play him.”

“Tell me about that.”

“His name is Sariel, and he’s an Angel of the Lord. He has a great arc. And if you ask me, from what I’ve read? He’s kinda stupid in love with Neal, the older brother of the pair. Not right away, but in the end that’s what makes him rebel against heaven and try to avert the apocalypse—”

Castiel stood up straight. “Do you have a pen, some paper?”

Dean gave him a tear off pad and a plastic stick pen. Castiel wrote ‘con men save the world’ on a pad of paper. “How many episodes of this has your roommate written?”

Dean gave a contemplative grunt. “Not sure. Twenty? Not counting all his background notes and lore. The lorebook’s huge.”

“I want to see it. How do a couple of grifters avert the apocalypse?”

“Chuck’s going to lose his mind,” Dean laughed. “But what if you don’t like it?”

“Then I’ll tell him what works and what doesn’t. But I’m really interested, Dean. Can he write?”

“Put it this way,” Dean said. “I’m compelled to go back over passages and read parts of it out loud. I ask him if he’s got new stuff to read. He doesn’t suck, Cas.”

The doorbell rang.

“Food’s here.” Dean squeezed Castiel. “Are you ready to eat?”
They ordered too much naan, but they always did. Dean spooned out another helping of saag paneer and pushed the foil dish of vindaloo towards Castiel’s empty plate. “More?”

“This is incredible,” Castiel said. “And this wine is perfect.”

“Dean picked it,” Kevin said. “He knows a lot about wine.”

Dean had the last swallow of his half-glass of wine. “I debated whether I should take a full sommelier course or restaurant management. I still can’t decide.”

Castiel raised his eyebrows, mouth covered with a napkin. He was going to say something about acting, Dean just knew it.

He kicked Chuck’s ankle under the table. “Chuck.”

“Hmm?” Chuck finally raised his eyes from his plate, casting a nervous look at Castiel.

“I told Cas about Paranormal.”

Chuck plastered on an embarrassed smile. “It’s just a work in progress,” he said. “I haven’t finished writing it.”

Castiel accepted the subject change and rested his fork on his plate. “Dean tells me you have a lot of material already.”

Chuck’s shoulders came up. “Well, I’ve been working on it for a while. Did he tell you what it’s about?”

“Yes. I was hoping you’d let me read your pilot.”

“Sure, I have to do some polishing and--”

“Stop,” Aaron said. “Dean. Give him your copy.”

“I just have to take care of a couple of details!” Chuck protested.

“You’ll never see it if you let him fuss over it,” Aaron said. “Chuck. Bite the bullet and just send it.”

Chuck nodded. “Okay. I just need to--”

“Forget it,” Kevin got up. “Email?”

“cjamesnovak@netwatch.com.”

Kevin groped for his iPad and squiggled his finger around on the screen. “Done. Let me know when you want the next one, I have all of them.”

Chuck sat back, defeated. “Okay, fine.”

Dean patted his shoulder. “It’s for your own good, my raving perfectionist friend.”

“I just wanted to give it a final pass.”
“It’ll be fine,” Castiel said. “Do you want feedback?”

Chuck nodded. “Yeah. That would be great. Thank you. I wasn’t even going to mention it—”

“I’m interested. Dean made a great pitch. It could be a few weeks before I get a chance to look at it—”

“Take your time.” Chuck said. “I don’t mean that. I want you to read it right now while I pace up and down and get heartburn.”

“Not gonna happen.” Dean started clearing the table, stacking plates and glasses. “We’re going on a date.”


Castiel tried to help but no one would let him touch anything. No one would let Dean wash dishes, so he found Castiel a hooded jacket and told him to wait out front.

Baby was pristine under her dust tarp, but the interior needed a wipe with a damp cloth. She backed out of the garage with the deep guttural rumble of a V-8 engine, and the gas gauge showed less than a quarter tank. He was going to have to fix that. Dean steered her into the alley and prowled around the corner, pulling up in front of the house.

Castiel stood on the front step, hands bunched up in the kangaroo pockets of Dean’s favorite hoodie, and the sight of Cas in something of his sent a slow curling heat through his body.

Baby’s driver side door closed with a thunk, and Dean spread his arms as wide as his grin. “Ready for a ride?”

Cas descended the steps, pausing to take it in.

“She’s huge. I knew classic cars were big, but—wow. How many miles to the gallon?”

“Best not to ask. She’s a thirsty girl. I hardly ever take her out any more. But your chariot awaits, Cas, let’s go.”

Castiel startled as he pulled the passenger door open. “So heavy.”

“She’s good American steel, down to the last inch.” Dean slid inside and pulled a shoebox out from under the driver’s seat. “Tunes.”

“Cassette tapes?”

“This is the full experience,” Dean said, and flashed a Maxell cassette. “Every one a classic.”

He slid the cassette in and punched a button. Foghat pounded out a four-count and crunchy guitars, and Castiel shook his head and laughed.

Dean tapped out the beat on the steering wheel with his thumbs. “So we’ll drive up the coast until we can’t see lights any more, get constellations wrong, all that. Good date?”

“Great date.” Castiel scooted closer, one hand on Dean’s knee. Dean covered Castiel’s hand with his until he had to turn the corner.

“First though. We need gas. And snacks.” Dean took the turn onto Hastings and pulled into a Petro-Can. “127.9 cents a litre? Ouch. There’s a reason why I retired her.”
“Use the expense account,” Castiel said.

Dean hopped out and activated the gas pump, nodding to the kid on the skateboard who said, “Hey man, nice car.”

Dean squeezed the nozzle and leaned against Baby’s flank. The price hit 50 dollars, and Dean was still pumping. Then 65, 78, 92…

Castiel opened the door, looking alarmed. “Dean. Is there something wrong with your gas tank?”

Dean smiled. “She was almost empty when we got here.”

Castiel whistled when the pump clicked shut, showing a final cost of $108.72. Dean jogged inside the station and emerged with a plastic sack and a long receipt thatBannered in the breeze.

“What’s in the bag?” Castiel asked.

“Bottled water, chocolate bars, cheese puffs—” he hauled on the steering wheel and the car turned in a wide arc back to the street. “Condoms and lube, you know, be prepared and all that.”

“Dean,” Castiel said. “We both did a full STD screening. We’re both clear.”

“I know.” Dean stalled for a few seconds by changing lanes, but then they were on the bridge to North Vancouver and he couldn’t use maneuvering as an excuse. “I’ve never had sex without a condom.”

“I’ve never had sex with.”

Shit. Shit. Dean’s stomach plummeted to the road. “How many partners have you had, Cas?”

“One.”


“There’s nothing wrong with that, Dean.”

Maybe there wasn’t. But Dean was remembering nights at bars, nights at parties. All that fine talk about how it was about people, not parts—

“Dean. It doesn’t matter to me. It doesn’t change anything.”

That was the second time he’d said that, and Dean still wasn’t sure what it meant. “Okay.”

They turned left toward a sunset turning the sky salmon and gold. Castiel reached across the bench seat to stroke Dean’s cheek, but he looked out the windshield at the sinking sun.

“I’ve worn one,” Castiel said. “I figured I should know how they worked. I was going to college, and I wasn’t such a funny looking adolescent any more.”

“I grew my hair long when I went to college,” Dean said.

Castiel smiled. “I did too. I’m sure it helped.”

Dean snuck a glance at him. “Did you hate it?”

“College?”
“The condom.”

Castiel pursed his lips. “It took a long time to climax. Dan Savage had recommended practicing manual stimulation with the condom on. I took his advice.”

Dean chuckled. “That is … so you, Cas.”

Cas huffed. “What do you mean?”

“It’s so practical. It’s sensible. If I’d practiced by jacking it with a rubber I probably would have been less of an idiot about lube in the beginning.”

“Dean. You didn’t attempt anal intercourse without lube?”

“Well, I meant with girls. But I learned, and that’s what matters.”

Castiel brushed his fingers down Dean’s cheek again. “I want you to be comfortable.”

Such a dry way to put it, but Dean had to shift in his seat. “Well you don’t have to, technically, and I don’t mind for like oral, since we’re clear.”

Castiel stayed quiet, and his hand fell to rest on the black leather seat. Dean peeked from the corner of his eye. Castiel watched him, chewing over an unspoken question.

“Ask me,” Dean said.

“Just curiosity.”

“Go ahead.”

“I wondered what makes you less comfortable about sex without a condom.”

Dean bit down on his lip. “I dunno. I’ve just never done it.”

“Is it too intimate?”

For a vivid moment Dean saw him and Castiel in bed. On his back, letting Castiel inside with nothing between them. Letting Cas be the first, and that made Dean squirm at how…virginal that sounded even in his own head when he was in no way any such thing. That was making too big a deal out of it. Wasn’t it?

He had to stop thinking about that. “Maybe? Cas, I’ve never done it. I just, I dunno. It should mean something, right?”

Castiel didn’t answer. Dean dared a glance, and Castiel wore the faintest little grin.

“What?”

“That’s a romantic thought.”

Heat rose from Dean’s collar all the way up his face. “Never mind. It’s stupid.”

“No it isn’t,” Castiel said. “It should mean something.”

“Why?”

“Because you say so, that’s why.”
Dean couldn’t die on the spot. That would hurt the car. “It’s stupid.”

Castiel reached up and stroked Dean’s burning cheek. “Whoever he is, he’d better know what he’s doing.”

“Cas, you’re killing me, here.”

“Should I require you to wear one too?”

Dean had leaned over to flip the tape, but Castiel’s question made him drop the cassette on the floor. “Shit!”

“I’ll get it.” Castiel retrieved it and sat up, pushing the tape inside the deck. “Should I?”

“You said you topped.”

“I usually do. Usually isn’t always.”

“I—should,” Dean said. “Fair’s fair.”

“It doesn’t carry the same significance as being penetrated?”

And just like that, Dean’s face was burning again. “It’s not like I’m saving it for marriage.”

“That would definitely make it special.”

Dean glanced at Cas again, and scowled at his smirk. “You’re making fun of me.”

“I’m not. Okay. Condoms for intercourse. Unless you change your mind.”

“Okay,” Dean said. “Agreed.”

***

Castiel knew the Sea to Sky Highway well enough. He’d driven up this way for Michael’s Whistler trip—surely they weren’t going all the way up there? But Dean changed cassettes and the car filled with the heavy rock flavored blues sounds of Led Zeppelin.

“Physical Graffiti?”

“There aren’t many original albums in Baby’s shoebox.” Dean glanced over his shoulder, signaled, and slid into a left hand turning lane.

“I always wondered where this turn led.”

“It’s one of the coolest parks ever.”

Dean crossed the oncoming lane and guided the rumbling Impala onto a narrow road, flanked on each side by trees. He kept his speed at a crawl, and gravel crunched under Baby’s weight. Dean clicked on his high-powered lights, spotted a turn, and guided the car to the right.

He parked in a small clearing with a picnic table and access to the shore. He cut the engine and Robert Plant’s voice stopped mid-wail, replaced by the sound of water lapping against the shore.

“This is it.” He got out of the Impala and went around back, retrieving a fleece blanket. He flapped it open, and the heads of three wolves gathered around a full moon. “Let’s sit on the beach. No
lights. No fires. Just the stars.”

Orion had all but disappeared behind a mountain on the other side of the sound, but even without time to adjust Castiel could pick out Gemini, standing near Orion’s shoulder.

“Close your eyes,” Dean said. “Leave them closed. Wait till you see this…”

Castiel closed his eyes, smiling when Dean draped half the blanket over his back.

“Gotta keep your eyes closed,” Dean turned him a little to the right. “No moon, no clouds, it’s perfect. Keep your eyes closed,” Dean breathed in Castiel’s ear.

“Do you have your eyes closed?”

“I do.” He kissed Castiel’s ear. “Just a little more.”

Castiel turned his head and found Dean’s mouth. “How did you find this place?”

“We camp here. Aaron and Kevin scuba dive. There’s a sunken ship in the water.”

“Do you camp in tents?”

“Well, how else would we do it?” Dean turned Castiel around, hands on his shoulders. “Open your eyes.”

Castiel grabbed Dean’s hand. “Dean.” A thick band of stars stretched across the sky, the mountains beyond the water black shapes. “This is beautiful.”

“There’s the Brothers, standing on the mountain,” Dean said.

“That’s Gemini.”

“It’s the Brothers.” Dean pointed. “That one’s Sammy, and the bigger one is me.”
Castiel smiled. “But Sam’s taller than you.”

“I’m the big brother.”

Dean wrapped the blanket over them both. It smelled like old dust, blending with the scent of saltwater and seaweed, the spilled wine of Dean’s cologne. He wore a different scent often enough that Castiel wondered how long it would take for him to know them all, to recognize what made him decide which to choose.

“So it’s the brothers,” Castiel said.

“You can’t see the Father, mountain’s in the way. Back there, on their left, the shape like a bowtie? That’s Baby. They travel around the sky with her.”

Orion and Cancer, the good student inside Castiel wanted to say. But he kept it to himself. “The stars are her tires?”

“Yeah, and Jupiter’s all up in her grill right now.”

“What else is there?”

“That diamond in front of the brothers, that’s the Window.”

“The Window.”

“So Mom can see us,” Dean said.

Castiel’s heart ached.

“So she can see Sammy get good grades and so she can see me looking out for him, so she can watch over us at night no matter where we are.”

That was their story growing up—endlessly traveling, only the story of a mother watching over them. “And where are you?”

Dean shifted, pointed again. “On the Road. All across the sky.”

He meant the Milky Way stretched over the water.

“And you’re up there forever,” Castiel said. “Among the stars.”

“Sam and I would take the car, when Dad got pretty bad. We’d take all the money with us, take the car, and drive until we found something to look at, all over America. But there was always the stars.”

“The brothers, the father, Baby, and the Window.”

“Yeah. Kinda silly, I guess.”

Castiel turned around inside their circle of blankets. “You got off the Road, though.”

“Couldn’t keep that up forever, did you see what it cost to fill Baby’s tank? But it’s how I grew up. Are you cold?”

“A little.”
“We could warm up in the car, if you wanted. Play some music—”

“Make out.”


***

Dean had meant a little kissing in the front seat, for the sake of the traditions that ruled when a classic car in a private spot with a good view, and people who really dug each other sitting inside it. But he’d wound up on his back with his shirt pushed up to expose his nipples, tight and hard in the cool air. Castiel kissed him again and again, one denim clad thigh wedged between his own, and the things he was whispering between kisses made Dean grind harder and more desperate against Castiel’s hip. Sex in the Impala was cramped but teenage Dean had been so horny he didn’t care.

It felt an awful lot like 2002 in here.

“Cas—”

“You’re perfect like this,” Castiel whispered into Dean’s ear and sucked it between his lips and teeth and ohgod—

Every scrape of Castiel’s teeth set off fireworks, if fireworks broke off tiny pieces to rush all along his body to burst again. He grabbed onto Castiel’s shoulders and rubbed himself shamelessly against Cas’s jeans.

“May I unzip your jeans, Dean?”

“Fuck, yes. Are we gonna—”

Strong hands tugged down his jeans and boxers, just enough for Castiel’s hand to curl around his cock. Cas swiped at the slippery fluid that leaked from the head and popped his fingers in his mouth, sucking them. He watched Dean stare at his fingers, grinned at Dean’s wide eyes when he licked his lips.

Castiel liked it when Dean lost his cool. Liked to make him grind and dryhump Castiel’s leg. Probably would like to hear him beg.

“Please,” Dean breathed.

Castiel smiled. The bastard. This was all his fault.

“Cas, please.”

“As you wish.”

Castiel took him in one long gulp. Dean let his head fall back against the door. He wasn’t going to last. The pressure was already so high and his mouth—

Dean’s toes curled in his boots and he let every moan and sigh sing out in the quiet, fogged over interior of the car. The dashboard dented under Dean’s fingers as he squeezed, trying not to buck as his body wound tighter, tighter. He felt a little dizzy, his breaths tight and fast.

Dean came, his lower lip clamped between his teeth, a bit of pain for one last attempt to hold back that failed. Castiel’s tongue slid and flexed as he swallowed.
Dean felt shaky with euphoria. He watched Castiel with a soft wonder.

“Cas,” Dean’s voice came out cracked. “You’re awesome.”

A rap sounded on the window, and Dean had his hips in the air in a heartbeat, yanking his jeans up, tugging his shirt down. Cold air licked around his waist as Castiel, now on the driver’s side, rolled the window down. A flashlight shone inside as a woman bent down to peer inside.

“Hiya,” she said. “Are you camping here tonight? I don’t see a tent.”

Oh fuck, they’d been busted. Parks department, or RCMP?

“We were stargazing,” Castiel said. “Do we have to leave?”

“If you want to get out of the park before I lock the gate, you betcha,” she said. “Sorry boys, that was the best timing I could give you.”

“Appreciate it,” Dean said.

“I could guess.”

All the blood rushed to Dean’s face. “Oh, God.”

Castiel laughed. The bastard. This was all his fault.

“We’ll be on our way, then. Thank you. Have a pleasant evening.”

“Hurry home, fellas.” The blond officer swung her light away, illuminating a black station wagon. Parks, not RCMP. It didn’t really matter, they still got busted, but at least it was Parks.

Castiel turned the key in the ignition. “Should we switch?”

“You want to drive for a bit?”

“Really? You’ll trust me with your baby?”

“I think I can let you drive to Lion’s Bay,” Dean said. “You need to step on the brakes harder than you think you do, and turn the wheel more, too. Other than that she’s a peach.”

Dean flipped the tape to the second side of Physical Graffiti and let Castiel take Baby out of the park.
Dean’s house didn’t have an espresso maker so Castiel made a run to Hastings Street the next morning. Dean’s recommendation was a cafe with a red, white, and green striped awning, and the latte he sipped on the short ride back was hot, the sweetness perfectly balanced.

A patrol car sat in Castiel’s spot in the driveway. Dean hadn’t been wrong about the probability of the police showing up while he was out. He parked on the street and carried Dean’s cup up the mossy concrete walk to the yellow house.

“Dean?” Castiel toed out of his shoes and crossed the empty living room to where a lone officer sat at the dining room table with Dean. It wasn’t going well, by the set of Dean’s mouth and his folded arms. Castiel sat beside Dean and gave him the plain white paper cup.

“This is Castiel Novak,” Dean said. “Cas. Constable Nick Monroe.”

Nick Monroe was a clean cut man with a snub nose and a neutral expression. He carried a peaked cap with a yellow band that matched the stripe down the side of his navy trousers. He’d collected papers, a notebook, and had left Dean a handful of business cards. “There isn’t really a lot we can do until your stalker crosses a line besides get court orders for a peace bond—”

“We’re not doing that,” Dean said. “Inias said it escalates the situation.”

“It’s the only action we can take at this stage.”

“Do I have to do it?”

“You’re not required to do it. I would like you to document every encounter that you believe involves your stalker. It’s all evidence that could lead to a conviction.”

“After she assaults me,” Dean folded his arms. “After it’s too late.”

“I’m afraid that’s true, Dean.”

“That’s just peachy. I’ll keep the records. What should I do with them?”

Constable Monroe wrote down a number on the back of one of his cards. “Reference this case number in the subject line of an email to me. You can send updates as often as you like.”

Dean held the card between two fingers. “Okay.”

Constable Monroe rose from his chair, standing about as tall as Castiel. “If you feel unsafe, trust your instincts and dial 911. We’d rather visit you for a panic attack than have to open a murder investigation, trust me.”

Dean’s smile had no humor in it. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I’d also appreciate it if you let our detachment know if you’re in town or away in Seattle. When are you returning?”

Dean glanced at Castiel. “Today? Tomorrow?”

“We’re not sure yet.”
“Send me an email, that’ll do. Have a good day, gentlemen.”

Castiel waited until the patrol car’s engine started. He turned to Dean and pushed the paper cup closer. “You haven’t touched your latte.”

“Sorry,” Dean said. “I was too busy trying to get that guy to take this seriously. He didn’t seem to like me at first.”

“How’d you win him over?”

Dean drank from his latte, and then put it down next to pink sheets of paper with his handwriting impressed on them. “He thought I was dating you for your money. I told him your money weirds me out.”

“Does it?”

Dean concentrated on aligning the corners of his incident report, folding the sheets into careful thirds.

“Dean. Is that true?”

Dean sighed. “We’re from really different worlds, Cas. You carry enough cash to pay my rent and my share of the bills in your pocket.”

“So does that make me an asshole?”

“No.” Dean reached across the table. “You’re great. But it’s weird. I lie in your bed and think, I could buy a reliable car with this money. I don’t have a shirt in my closet that cost less than my monthly grocery budget. It’s Bizzaroworld.”

Footsteps sounded on the stairs from the basement. Dean picked up his cup and drank.

“All clear with the po-po?”

“Oh stop.” Dean rolled his eyes skyward. “Like you’ve got anything to fear from the cops.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt.” Chuck emerged from the basement in another wrinkled t-shirt and equally wrinkled khaki trousers. “Hey, Cas. Morning.”

“Good morning, Chuck.”

Chuck rubbed his beard. “Have you eaten breakfast yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Should I start something? Omelettes?”

“Good idea,” Dean said. “I’m going back to Seattle.”

“What, today?”

Dean and Castiel exchanged glances. “If you’re done everything you need to do,” Castiel said.

“I didn’t do laundry.”

“Bring it back to my place.”
“I think I need my own wheels in Seattle, Cas. How about I follow you in?”

He was going to drive the Impala that far? “Sure. There’s that parking lot across the street. You can use that.”

“That’s going to be a ton of money,” Dean said.

“It won’t be too bad. I’ll cover it.”

Chuck made a decent omelet filled with cheese and mushrooms. They ate quickly and re-packed, Dean transferring dirty clothes and clean into soft nylon bags. He held one in each hand, testing their weight. “That’ll do. I’ll meet you out front.”

“Okay.” Castiel took his suitcase and dropped it in the front. He leaned against the Tesla’s flank and breathed in the scent of magnolias mingled with late-blooming cherry trees. An engine grumbled on his left, and he followed the sound to a black-clad, helmeted figure on a heavy touring motorcycle.

Castiel counted in a breath, held it, counted out the exhale. It’s okay. It’s okay. He studied the garden in front of the house across the street, waiting for the biker to pass by. He listened for the deep sound of Dean’s Impala, but the motorcycle sounded louder, closer, battering the walls of calm Castiel tried to build.

It’ll pass.

The engine thrummed and cut off. He couldn’t stop there, but he had, swinging one leather-clad leg back over the saddle to stand spread legged in the street.

Denial closed Castiel’s throat. No. It can’t be. It isn’t. It can’t—

The driver lifted the full face helmet and Dean grinned at him.

“Built her myself.” Pride made him stand tall. “Assembled all of it from the frame out, did her paint, everything. Technically she’s a 1988 Electra-Glide. I call her Sweetheart.”

Dean’s smile punched Castiel in the chest.

“You can’t—drive that. Dean, no.” His voice rose. “You cannot drive that. Put it away.”

Dean’s jaw dropped. “What? Cas, what the hell?”

“Put it away! I’ll get you a car in Seattle.”

“Cas--”

“I’ll buy you a car. Any car you want.”

“The fuck you will,” Dean said.

“Dean, I’m serious.”

“I am too.” He squared off his posture, towering to his full height. “I built her from scratch. Piece by piece. I drive her all the time.”

“You can drive my car.” Castiel held out his keys. “Dean, please. Put it away.”
He could lose control, the bike knifing out sideways and spilling him onto the highway, the SUV behind him following too close to stop. Dean thrown like a rag doll up over the hood, landing behind with a sick, wet thud. Tubes everywhere, casts and a cage to hold his bandaged head still—

_No. No._

Castiel staggered away. The morning’s eggs and mushrooms rushed to escape, sour bile and basil coating his mouth.

“Whoa,” Dean shuffled backward, came close again with a bottle of water. “Okay. I’ll put her away. Cas, it’s okay, I’ll—I’ll walk her into the carport. Take the water, Cas.”

The scent of leather so close made him gag. Dean backed away again, leaving him to retch in the street, to heave even though there wasn’t anything left.

But he returned, leathers gone, one of the cashmere sweaters worn over his blue checked shirt. The biker boots were gone, replaced by blundstones. He hauled on a garden hose. “I’m gonna rinse this off. Just take it easy, okay?”

A powerful stream of water pushed the mess to the gutters. Castiel drank a little water, waited for it to come back up.

“Let’s go back inside,” Dean said. “Rest a bit, okay? Then we’ll go. Come on.”

Dean led him by the hand. He tossed the hose on the lawn and led them inside. He closed his bedroom door behind them and sat Castiel on the bed, pulling his shoes off.

“Do you want to be alone?”

“No.”

Dean took his boots off. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“No.”

Castiel turned his face to the wall. The duvet was rough under his cheek but he turned his nose into the sheets. Exhaustion swept over him. He’d lost it. He couldn’t explain. Didn’t want to say the words. Dean probably thought he’d gone crazy.

Maybe he had.

“Okay.” A floorboard creaked under Dean’s shifting weight. “Can I lie down beside you?”

“Yes.”

Dean spooned up behind him. Dean was here, warm and alive and moving on his own, his breath ruffling Castiel’s hair. Nothing had happened to him. He was safe.

“You’re safe,” Castiel whispered.

“I’m right here, Cas. It’s okay.”

“No motorcycles, Dean. Ever.”

“It’s okay,” Dean’s voice was soothing, soft. “I’m right here.”
Dean smelled like whiskey, coffee, and old books. He breathed it in, holding onto Dean’s wrist. He didn’t let go even when he drifted off to sleep.

***

They took the drive back to Seattle in silence. Castiel reclined his seat and closed his eyes the moment Dean got onto the highway, and Castiel might have even been asleep when Dean drove into the garage under his Bell Street condo.

“I’m going to start laundry,” Dean said. “Are you hungry?”

“Not really.” Castiel trudged upstairs. He hadn’t eaten since the breakfast Dean had hosed down into the gutters. The sounds of television filtered down to the kitchen.

Dean stared upwards, imagining Castiel slouching against his oxblood leather couch, staring at the screen. The roar of fans and a sports announcer clicked to a suspenseful musical score to news reporting, which became cheering from a game show.

Dean unloaded laundry into the washer. Castiel’s smooth composure had cracked before Dean took off his helmet and started singing Sweetheart’s praises. Dean never saw anybody so afraid, and he could guess why: Ennis was young, his death an unexpected accident. Castiel probably developed a phobia, and Dean had popped a wheelie right on top of it.

He hadn’t wanted to talk. Dean didn’t need him to tell the whole sad and grisly story, but this shit needed patching over. He climbed the stairs and leaned against the doorway.

Castiel hugged a plum-purple pillow with one arm and flipped channels, pausing on each for a few seconds before going to the next. He didn’t look at Dean. “I’m sorry.”

He had planned to apologize to Cas. “All I’m worried about is that you’re okay.”

“I have a thing about motorcycles,” Castiel laughed softly at himself. “In case you haven’t guessed.”

Dean took one step inside. “Does it have to do with how Ennis died?”

Castiel’s grip on the pillow tightened.

Dean stayed still. “I guess it did. I understand now.”

“I should tell you.” Cas licked his lips. “I should explain.”

“I can guess what happened.”

“It wasn’t just the accident. It was everything that came after.”

Dean took another step. “He didn’t die in the accident.”

Castiel stared unseeing at sports highlights. A golfer drove the ball down a fairway Dean didn’t recognize.

Castiel spoke as the ball bounced onto the green. “It was going to take a lot of rehab, but he could wiggle his toes, control his bladder. They thought he would walk again. Get most of the use of his right hand back.”

He stretched out his hand and tugged Dean down to the couch.
“Then his family came.”

Dean felt sick. “They wouldn’t let you in.”

“They were split down the middle about me, Rosses vs. Darlings,” Castiel said. “There were fights.”

“Oh, no.”

He stroked Dean’s hair as if Dean was the one who needed comforting. “The Darlings tried to have him declared unfit.”

“They wanted you out of there that bad?”

“Bad enough their first grandson was half black. Gay was just too much to deal with.”

“Fuck. As if you needed the situation to be worse.”

“They were screaming at each other when he had his first seizure. They never really stopped. It took two weeks for him to die.”

Dean squeezed around Castiel’s waist. “Oh God, Cas. Did you--I mean, did they donate--”

“No.” The tears spilled over the top of his cheekbones, pooling in Castiel’s ears. He swallowed, and the words were forced, breathy. “They don’t accept organ donations from homosexuals.”

Dean hid Castiel’s head in the crook of his neck and stroked his back. His chest ached. He’d sell Sweetheart. He could never make Castiel feel like this again.

“Ennis was riding his motorcycle up from Oakland,” Castiel said. “The movers weren’t bringing his things for another week, but he couldn’t wait to come home.”

“Here,” Dean said. “This apartment.”

“Everything was ready except the living room. We didn’t know what we wanted to do with it. We were going to decide after the wedding.”

“Cas, I’m sorry.” Dean shifted to fit a little better in Castiel’s arms. “And that was seven years ago.”

“Yes. I should be done grieving, I guess.”

Dean laid a hand over Castiel’s heart. “You never get done, Cas. Mom died when I was four, and I’m still not done.”

“That’s how I feel,” Castiel said. “Like a part of me will always be empty.”

“Like your living room.” Oh fuck, he shouldn’t have said that. “Sorry.”

Castiel let his head drop to the cushions. “It’s kind of ridiculously obvious symbolism, isn’t it.”

Dean smiled. “Maybe a little.”

“Do you think I should fill it?”

Dean lifted his head. “When you decide you want to. How you want to. I know you rich dudes hire
decorators to do this kind of thing—”

“Except the solid gold toilet seats. We pick those out ourselves.”

His joke warmed Dean’s heart. “But baby steps, all right? Maybe just think of one thing you’d want, and then take time to think about it.”

Cas turned his face into Dean’s hair. “Thank you, Dean.”

***

They spent the evening watching *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* and folding Dean’s laundry. Castiel woke up at 5 A.M. and ran his five miles. He left the keys to the Tesla behind for Dean and went to work in a taxi. He headed straight for his office and emailed the chef a request for “whatever breakfast was available to the staff.”

Twenty minutes later a warm dish filled with scrambled eggs and sausage arrived with coffee, fresh fruit, and a tiny glass of mango-chia lassi. Castiel eyed the white-clad kitchen staffer, and realized that Dean probably knew her name.

Ava brought him set design sketches and plans to duplicate the interior of the houses they’d chosen for location shoots for *Grosvenor Lane*. He eyed the precise drawings. “Thank you, Ava.”

“Lucas said that he’d made an offer to the historical society, and they’ll probably accept.”

Castiel blinked. “Did he email you from Tahiti? Sarah will kill him.”

“He said it was the only thing he’d left undone.”

“Alright. Thank you. Wait.” Castiel shoved his chair away from the desk. “If you wanted to redecorate your living room, where would you begin?”

Ava pivoted on the graphite carpet. “Castiel? Do you want me to research design firms?”

Castiel’s stomach gave an anxious lurch. “No, I’m just wondering. Where do you start? If you weren’t going to hire a designer.”

“I’d start foolishly. I’d look for one knockout piece, and make the room revolve around it.”

“Like a couch?”

“Or a chair, or a work of art on the wall. Even a light fixture.”

“Thanks, Ava.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to research a designer for you?”

“I’m sure,” Castiel said. “Just a stray thought.”

***

Dean was in the shower when the phone rang, of course. He blundered out of the perfect warm spray and pressed the phone to his ear. “Aaron.”

“Hey. Dean, sorry, I didn’t catch you before you left. Did you pay the hydro bill?”
“Don’t tell me the electricity is out.”

“No. It’s just the due date is Thursday and you never initialed it on the calendar, and I’m doing our budget.”

“I didn’t but I can,” Dean said. “Just let me rinse off and I’ll call you back.”

Five minutes later he was sitting at the breakfast bar with his laptop open and a latte by his side. He tried a sip. Castiel’s was better, but it would do.

He opened his online banking account, answering extra security questions since he wasn’t using his computer at home. The account overview page loaded, and Dean nearly dropped his cup.

There was fifty grand in his bank account.

He stared at the numbers again. $51,920.10, in actual fact, with two deposits for twenty five thousand paid fourteen days apart. Sweat broke out on his back. Was there some kind of mistake?

No. Castiel was still paying him.

What the hell was he doing here? He was in the man’s apartment. He was sleeping in Castiel’s bed, cuddling on the couch, learning all the things Cas just didn’t tell people, and all the while he’d been pulling a paycheck.

He hadn’t forgotten why he was here, not really. Castiel had wanted someone by his side to stave off whoever his family had tried to throw at him. He paid him for that. Once the wedding season was over, this was over. But they were friends now. Weren’t they?

Dean checked the date. The deposit had been before Lucas’s wedding. Before they started...this. When Dean was still contracted. What should he do with the money? Keep it? Castiel would tell him to keep it.

Castiel would say it was nothing.

The phone rang.

“Aaron, sorry. I got distracted. Banking stuff, I haven’t looked at my account in a while.”

“Everything okay? You need me to cover you for Hydro?”

Dean clicked through the bill payment screens. “No, I got it. And I’m kicking money into our grocery account. Two hundred and fifty good?”

“Dude, you’re hardly ever here.”

“Eh, but when I’m back I’ve got Cas with me, so it evens out.”

“How’s it going with him? I mean besides the good looks and the piles of money.”

“It’s going alright, I guess. We’ll see what happens.”

Aaron spoke quietly into the phone. “Heard you guys having a fight over your bike.”

“You guys heard that?”

“The whole street heard that.”
“He had a bad experience.”

“Okay.” The clatter of keys sounded on Aaron’s line. “As long as you’re okay.”

“I’m fine. Listen, I’ve gotta go, I have to go meet with Inias, give him all the stuff I got from the cops. I’ll catch you later.”

Dean drank the last of his latte, gone cold and too syrupy near the bottom.
They settled into a routine. Castiel got up at the crack of dawn to run and go to work before anyone else got there. Dean would wake up at a civilized hour and dropped in to meet Anna or Inias. Then they’d have lunch, part for the afternoon, and eat dinner at home, whether Dean made it or Castiel brought it with him. Then they’d practice dancing in the big empty room and go to bed early even if they didn’t get to sleep right away.

Dean took pictures and posted them to Instagram, and his followers swelled to the thousands.

Castiel took him to the gym to teach him rock climbing with Ezekiel. He shot four over par at Inglewood and Cain Novak characterized his game as thoughtful. “You’ll take a risk, but you’re not reckless,” he’d said. After the game Cain introduced him around the club as “Castiel’s beau” with a hand on his shoulder. Dean thought he saw Dash, but the man had walked out of the room too quickly for him to be sure.

It was all going so well.

Then another twenty five thousand dollar deposit landed in Dean’s account a few days before they would leave for Banff. Dean looked at the balance for a long time before he closed the lid of his laptop and knocked on Castiel’s office door, a perfect smile on his face as he let himself in.

“What’s it about?”

Castiel had paper on his desk, documents stuck through with post-it flags for signatures.

“Contracts?”

“Right up to my eyes.” Castiel rolled his chair back and greeted Dean with a kiss. “Do you mind if we eat here today? I know we usually go out, but I’ve got to work and eat at the same time.”

“I don’t mind. Do you mind if I read? Chuck emailed me the first draft of a script that he’s not too sure about.”

Castiel looked up. “I’m not sure, but he said it was called The Monster at the End of this Book.”

“Is it for his script about the brothers?”

“Yeah. Have you looked at the pilot yet?”

“I haven’t had the chance to read it.”

“You should.”

Castiel called an order to the kitchen and the meal was so good Dean wasn’t sure why Castiel ever left to have lunch. The swordfish had been a delight, the roasted eggplant complex and a great counter to the bitter green salad dominated by arugula. They split a carafe of chilly chardonnay from the Yakima Valley, and Dean stole the rest of Castiel’s when he reached for his tablet to look something up.

“Dean, do you have a preference between roasted chicken breast or pan-seared salmon for the flight to Calgary?”
“Neither,” Dean said. “I wouldn’t be able to keep it down.”

Castiel looked up from the booking screen. “Do you get airsick?”

Dean gave a pained smile. “I’m not really a good flyer.”

Castiel nodded. “Phobia?”

“The first flight I took, we had a really shaky ride. It went on forever. I was losing my mind, and then the oxygen masks triggered…only they didn’t all trigger. Mine didn’t fall down.”

“Oh, wow. That’s—”

Dean smirked and raised his glass. “A good reason to stay on the ground.”

Castiel touched his computer screen. “Vancouver to Banff is about nine hours.”

Dean scoffed. “The flight’s an hour. Even with the gong show at the airport and the drive from Calgary, it’s faster.”

“Dean. Would you rather fly, or take a road trip? I’m willing to do either. There are charging stations along the route.”

Driving would take longer. “You’d drive it with me?”

“Of course. We can have lunch in…” he consulted the monitor. “Kamloops. We can be in Banff in time for the rehearsal if we leave in the morning.”

“If we flew to Calgary would you read Chuck’s pilot on the plane?”

“If you take a turn driving I’ll read it in the car. Deal?”

“Deal.” Dean’s smile spread across his face. “I was dreading that flight.”

“You can’t stay on the ground forever. You could get a call for a New York show; you need to be prepared.”

He was right, Dean knew that. But nobody was meant to hurtle through the sky in a metal tube. “I figured it could wait until it couldn’t wait any more.”

“That’s sooner than you think. Your career is about to take off, and someone in LA will want to see you, probably pretty soon.”

Dean nodded. His career—the unwritten part of their contract. Castiel was going to get him a role on his show, and that should be enough to get the ball rolling. As far as goodbyes went, it was a nice parting gift.

No. Not a gift. The audition for Justin was a severance bonus.

“What’s wrong?” Castiel asked. “You look pensive.”

This is going to be over soon. “Got distracted thinking about flying.” Dean kissed Castiel’s cheek. “You wanna practice dancing again tonight?”

Castiel swiveled his chair around. “Tango again?”
“That ended well.”

“I thought so too.” Castiel dragged Dean into his lap. “Dinner from Shiro’s?”

“Yes, and let me go.” Dean straddled Castiel’s lap.

Castiel laughed. “You’re kicking and screaming to get away, I see.”

“Well, let me go in a minute.” Dean draped his arms around Castiel’s neck. “Anna’s coming to get me any second now.”

They were still kissing when she arrived.

***

Anna dragged Dean away with a laugh and Castiel waited ten minutes for them to settle in her office before he opened the website he’d closed when Dean came in for lunch.

Castiel studied the photograph again. The table was a hewn slab of Indonesian teak, the gaps, live edge, and the last few inches filled in with clear acrylic resin. He’d gone to the showroom alone, seen it in person. He signed the bill leaning one hand on its glass-polished surface.

Dean was going to be so surprised.

One knockout piece, Ava had said. The long slab would seat ten. Castiel had no idea what kind of chairs would match it, but his heart beat a happy march just looking at it. The delivery men would come in on Sunday and it would be there when they came back from Banff.

Maybe they could have a party. Just a little one, with family—he’d need to buy chairs. And the other half of the room was still empty.

Maybe he did need to hire a decorator. Ava wasn’t usually wrong about these things. But Castiel wanted Dean to see the table first, just on its own.

Castiel couldn’t wait for Dean to see it.

***

The trip to Banff was beautiful, with tiny puffs of cloud dotting a deep blue sky. They set out from Dean’s place in Vancouver, and Castiel gave up the wheel after a nice lunch in Kamloops.

He took regular breaks to look out the window while he read the pilot script of Paranormal. “Did Chuck base this on your family?”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “Well, except for the bit where Sal and Neal and their dad are hunting monsters. That was all Chuck.”

“I asked because of the car, the 1967 Ford Galaxie 500? And then Sal and Neal’s mother dies when they’re very young.”

“Yeah. I can’t tell you the reason, because spoilers.”

“But we find out?”

“Years later.”
“Deep backstory. That’s good.” Tall trees crowded the four-lane highway, their gaps showing vacation cabins, a glimpse of a river. “This thing with the woman in white, her revenge on unfaithful men, is that a parallel?”

“Hey, shit. I never thought of that,” Dean said. “I don’t know if Henry was cheating on Elizabeth. I know they had some marital problems because of spoilers.”

“You know the whole story, don’t you?”

“When Chuck gets into a corner he usually comes to me.”

“Why did Sal’s girlfriend Kylie have to die? To force him back into the hunting life, but who killed her?”

Dean grinned. “You’re hooked.”

“Do you have any more of these?”

“I can get you more. Do you want the next episode?”

“So you have them on your computer? I need to read the next one. I want to send this to Zeke.”

Dean gaped at him. “Are you serious?”

“I want a supernatural script, Dean. Werewolves are done. Vampires are done. I think Paranormal’s got legs.” Castiel gestured at a green sign announcing that Sicamous was just ahead. “Find someplace to park here, I want the next episode.”

Dean laughed and watched for the exit. “You really like it.”

“It’s good. I have tiny nitpicks for criticism, but mostly I have questions about the overall shape of the story.”

Holy shit. Happiness bubbled up. Dean couldn’t stop smiling. “You really do like it. Cas. Do you—do you want it?”

“I can’t say that yet,” Castiel said. “But I want to read the next one.”

Castiel tore through episodes, swiping the screen with a bandaged fingertip. Dean itched to call Chuck but he held out, concentrating on the sharp turns through the pass. Chilly air swirled over his arms—Castiel had lowered the passenger side window, breathing in long and slow.

“Read too long again?”

“I can’t help it. That’s how Devil’s Trap ends? They get T-boned by a semi? People will go wild.”

“You’ve read all of Season One?”

“I’ve been speed reading. Just getting the story down. Sal’s—what is he? Is it a Rosemary’s Baby thing?”

“Do you actually want me to tell you, or do you want to read it?”

“At least tell me if I’m right.”

Dean grinned. “Nope.”
“I’m going to be distracted all weekend,” Castiel complained. “I haven’t been sucked in like this since the first season of *True Detective.*”

He raised the window again, balancing the laptop on his knees. “I’m going to run out of battery in an hour.”

“We’ll be in Banff by then.” Dean squinted at sunlight reflected by snow-topped mountains. “Or else really close. Then we’ll check in. Then you’ll have to rehearse. Then there’s the rehearsal dinner and socializing—”

Castiel groaned and opened *In my Time of Dying.* The light turned to gold, throwing violet shadows over the highway.

Chuck was going to flip—it had been an act of will for his friend to keep from asking Castiel how he’d liked the pilot, sticking to small talk and hockey.

Castiel covered his mouth. “Neal’s dead? Really?”

Dean just grinned wider. “Keep reading.”

Castiel read. Dean raced the laptop battery to Banff, but the screen blinked out just past Lake Louise.

“Shit!”

“I tried, Cas.”

“I know. Will you call him while I’m in rehearsal?”

“Yeah. I’ll probably catch him just as he’s waking up, he’s gotta work tonight.”

“Tell him to have his representative call me.”

“Yes!”

“There’s a lot more to handle before it’s really a yes,” Castiel warned. “But I like it so far. I’m going to tell Zeke.”

“Joel will kill you.”

“I can’t wait until after the honeymoon. Joel will forgive me.”

***

Castiel looked down at an alpine lake far below the highway and squeezed his finger. It pulsed in painful irritation, but Dean had assured him the cut wasn’t deep.

They’d slept in Dean’s bed, made a breakfast of chewy, dense cookies with oatmeal, dried fruit, nuts and seeds, and chunks of dark chocolate. Castiel had cut himself cutting pecans into little chunks, the slice through his finger shocking and sharp. Dean had washed it for him, pressing down to stop the bleeding.

“You’re supposed to kiss it better,” Castiel had said, and Dean laughed. He did kiss it, before and after he’d bandaged it.

“Sometimes the kitchen asks for a little blood,” Dean said, and showed Cas how to hold the knife
properly. They’d stood kissing in the kitchen while the cookies baked, lifted the first ones off the parchment and ate them hot with black coffee, boxing half of them to bring along.

Castiel reached inside the box and broke the last palm-sized disc in half, offering the slightly bigger chunk to Dean. He stopped singing *D’yer Maker* long enough to devour it, cheeks puffed out like a squirrel’s. It was gross.

He looked so cute.

“What?” Dean asked.

“You eat like someone’s going to take it away from you.”

“You’ve seen my brother. He’s gigantic. I just want both hands on the wheel, this road is twisty.”

Soon the road twisted northeast and Dean turned off the highway onto a busy, SUV-laden street. He glanced at the map on the display screen, and looked up just in time.

Dean’s eyes widened as they rounded a bend and the hotel stood nestled in conifer covered mountains.

“Holy shit. It’s a castle.”

Castiel got to see the hotel for the first time again, reflected in Dean’s eyes.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s terrifying,” Dean laughed. “It doesn’t even look real, it’s like the junior cousin to Hogwarts.”

“It kind of does, doesn’t it?”

Dean looked down at his clothes, then back to the road. “There’s a charging station at the hotel, right? We need it.” He snuck another look at the hotel, half awed.

Castiel wanted to see his face when they wandered the streets of London. He wanted to see that wonder and amazement, to hold Dean’s hand and let him stare as long as he liked.

“Castiel?”

“Hmm?”

“The car needs charging.”

“Oh. They can do it at the hotel.”

Dean chuckled. “Were you thinking about *Paranormal*?”

*I was thinking about you.* “Rehearsing my best man speech.”

“You made it,” Dean said. “Three weddings in six weeks.”

“Four weddings in eight weeks.”

“What?” Dean glanced at him in surprise. “Oh! You mean Jess and Sam.”

“Did you forget?”
Dean flashed him a quick smile. “No. Just, you’re not the best man for that one.”

“I get to sit back and relax for a change.”

“It won’t be like this.” Dean meant the short line of luxury cars idling at the front entrance, waiting for a parking attendant. “They’re getting married in Jess’s parents’ back yard. The wedding dinner is roast beef on a bun and a pony keg of beer. I’m borrowing my brother’s tent.”

“I’ve never been to a wedding like that.”

Dean grinned and let his fingers drift down Castiel’s cheek. “I know. We can have sex in the tent.”

“It’ll be fun.” Castiel caught his hand and kissed Dean’s fingers.

A tap on the window made Dean jump. Lucas pressed his face against the glass, tanned and sun-streaked. Castiel gave him the finger and stepped out.

“You want help with your bags? It’s a circus. This is the opening weekend for the golf course. Hey, Dean.”

“Lucas,” Dean handed the keys to a valet and smiled. “You’re glowing. Have a good time in Tahiti?”

“I’m gonna need that sedan any minute now, Dean. You in the market for a used coupe?”

“Like you’d give that car up,” Dean scoffed and headed for the crowded front desk.

“No there,” Lucas said. “We check in on the fifth floor. Come on.”

Lucas hefted Castiel’s golf bag and led the way to the elevators. “Dean, rehearsal will be about an hour and then we’ll have dinner in the Angus room.”

“Sounds fine. I have to make a phone call anyway, I think I should be finished in time for dinner.”

The suite had a view of the dense woodland all around the hotel. Dean stretched and let his neck crack as he did a couple of neck rolls.

The bellman stood up. “If you like, we can send someone up with a shiatsu chair for a rejuvenating muscle treatment. It only takes 20 minutes.”

“Oh, I’m good,” Dean said.

“He’ll take it,” Lucas said over him. “It’ll do you good, Dean.”

“Alright, fine.” A massage did sound good. A few minutes wouldn’t hurt.

Castiel kissed Dean goodbye and followed Lucas to the rehearsal. Dean plugged in his laptop and checked Skype. Chuck was online, and Dean pressed the call symbol.

Chuck had a cookie in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other. “Hey, Dean. How’s Banff?”

“Swanky. This place is like a castle. Set your coffee down. Put the cookie down.”

“What?”
“Just do it.”

Chuck laid them down, eyes already wide. “Did Castiel read my pilot?”

“He read it.”

The blood drained from Chuck’s face. “What did he say? Did he say anything?”

“Chuck, he wanted to read more.”

Chuck’s face came alight. “That’s good! I can send him, hmm, *Home*, maybe?”

“Chuck, he’s read up to partway through *In My Time of Dying*.”

Chuck did a double-take. “Holy shit.”

“He said you need a representative, man. Like an agent, or a lawyer.”

“Do you think Sam would—”

“We can ask.” Dean typed Sam a message: **Can you take a Skype call?**

Chuck covered his mouth with one hand. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“It’s a long way from a yes. That’s what he said. But he likes it and he wants to give it to Zeke, even though he’s about to get married and then run away to Finland.”

Sam’s message popped up. Sure, what’s up?

“I’m adding Sam now.”

Sam’s face appeared, the oak cabinets and country check curtains of Jess’s mother’s kitchen in the background. “What’s going on?”

“How do you feel about handling Chuck as a client?”

“What’s going on? Chuck? Why do you need an American lawyer?”

“Dean showed Castiel my pilot and he likes it.”

Sam shoved his hair out of his eyes, leaning close to the webcam. “That’s great. I’m not an agent, but I can help out while you find one.”

“Thanks, Sam. I’m not sure it’s sunk in, it doesn’t feel real.” Chuck held onto his coffee cup with both hands. “So what do I do?”

“Everything you get from him, send to me. Keep good records. Find a literary agent.”

“Maybe Crowley knows somebody. Hang on.” Dean got up to answer a knock at the door. A man with a folding massage chair came in, setting up near Dean’s laptop.

“Guys, I’m gonna just be listening, I’m getting a massage.”

“Swanky,” Chuck said. “Okay Sam, what’s the first thing we do?”

Dean let their voices become a hum as the masseur applied a deft, magical touch. Dean relaxed under strong hands that melted him into the chair. This was Chuck’s big break—even if Castiel
said no to it, he’d have an agent ready to beat down Hollywood’s doors. Dean had a hand in that, and it felt good.

It did.

Dean shut his eyes tight.
Dinner was trout with almonds and lemon. Dean sat with Castiel on one side and a round-faced Mrs. Komarek on the other, rose cheeked and only tall enough to come to Dean’s shoulder. She elbowed him with small titters, and asked how he and Castiel met.

“Well, Mrs. Komarek—”

“Let me tell it,” Castiel said.

“Okay.”

“I first saw him in a Starbucks.”

Dean set his fork down and turned his head toward Cas.

“Really,” Mrs. Komarek said, platinum hair falling loose from her knotted bun as she leaned forward. “Did he steal your latte?”

“A little girl had wandered away from her mother, and had gotten out into the street. We were all looking for her inside while her mother lived her worst nightmare. And in he comes, with this precious little girl on his hip, and he wouldn’t even take a free coffee as a reward.”

Mrs. Komarek elbowed him again. “What a good boy you are, Dean.”

“I didn’t know you were there, Cas.”

“I don’t think you noticed me.” Castiel lifted his wine glass and drank. “I remember I watched you leave, and I wished I’d stepped forward, thanked you, found an excuse to learn your name.”

Dean’s eyes shone with golden stars. “I had no idea.”

“Then I show up to the audition room, late with Starbucks, and who walks in but him?”

“Like a love story,” Mrs. Komarek sighed. “And did you get the part, Dean?”

“I think Castiel didn’t think it was fair to cast me if we were dating.”

“I’m going to make Ezekiel decide, actually. No pressure, Zeke.”

Mrs. Komarek wiped her mouth with a snowy white napkin. “You must accept him, Ezekiel. This part could use a good young man like Dean, I trust?”

“Dean’s a talented actor, Mrs. Komarek, but I’m not auditioning until Joel and I get back from Finland.”

Dessert arrived, but Dad turned his down. “Castiel, would you come with me? I need you for a moment.”

“Of course.” What for? Something Dad didn’t want others to hear, since he led them out of the dining room and into a smaller conference space, the doors unlocked, but the room empty.

“What is it?”
Cain Novak reached inside his jacket pocket and unfolded a sheet of paper, handing it to Castiel.

Castiel looked at the masthead and quit breathing. It read Spengler and Zeddmore LLP.

Castiel clutched the page. “Where did you get this?”

Oh but he knew, he knew.

“Can you explain why you and Dean needed a legal agreement in writing before you even went on your first date?”

The paper trembled. “Dad.”

“Castiel. Start at the conclusion, and then explain yourself.”

Castiel dared to read the slant of his father’s eyebrows, the downward set of his mouth, the piercing, icy blue eyes. He sighed and let his shoulders slump for two breaths. The game was up and they were caught. Dad wasn’t angry—he was disappointed, and that was worse. Castiel had failed to live up to his personal integrity. He’d chosen deception over truth, and he’d gotten caught. He should have known that it would come out. That he would stand before his father with his head bowed, unable to explain why he’d done it.

But he could.

He dragged his gaze up from the carpet and met his father’s watchful concern. “I hired Dean to pretend to be my boyfriend and accompany me to these weddings.”

Dad tilted his head, eyebrows knitted together. “Why, boy? Dash was happy to go with you. More than happy.”

“Dad—” Castiel sighed. “I know you like Dash. He’s been friends with Michael for years.”

“He’s a fine young man. A little younger than you—”

“It’s not there, Dad.” He had to understand. He would. “I know Dash was happy to be my date. Yes he’s good looking. Yes he likes guys. But there’s no spark.”

Dad looked thoughtful. “No spark.”

“That—I don’t know.” How did he put this into words? “There was just something. A curiosity, I guess. Right? When you met Mother. You wanted to know why she stood in front of a Degas and looked like she wanted to cry.”

Understanding smoothed Dad’s forehead. “And I didn’t rest until I found out.”

“I’m not even a tiny bit curious about Dash, Dad. He’s a nice guy. But it would have ended badly, and then his connection to us would be awkward.”

“And so you hired a boyfriend.” Now Dad looked disappointed. “Why didn’t you just tell us?”

“Dad, if I’d said no to Dash, all of you would have put your heads together to find someone else.”

Dad pursed his lips and looked up. An overhead chandelier put a ring of lights in his eyes. “Tell me one thing. That story you told Sinikka, about seeing Dean in the Starbucks. Was it true?”

“Yes,” Castiel said. “That really happened.”
Dad’s eyebrow rose, and he smiled. “Ah.”

The floor shifted under Castiel’s feet. “It’s not like that. He’s just…really great.”

“Did I raise fools, Castiel?”

“No, Sir.”

“Then tell me what it is like.”

“He’s really easy to talk to.”

“And easy to look at. Easy to touch?”

“Dad.”

“He’s been living with you for weeks. I’ve barely been in your apartment for five minutes at a time.”

“It was logical.”

“And now it’s natural?”

How—

Dad smiled. “He fits in your life. You let him fit.”

“He’s used to living with people. He’s got three roommates in Burnaby.”

“Always an explanation.”

“We’re just friends,” Castiel said.

“Son, in my day when you made a friend like that, you married them.”

“I can’t.”

“Son—” Dad caught himself, shook his head. “Never mind. I went looking for you Thursday afternoon, but Ava said you had gone to a woodworking shop?”

“I bought a table for my apartment.”

“A table.”

“It’s salvaged teak and acrylic resin. It’ll be there when we get back. Don’t tell Dean. It’s a surprise.”

“A surprise. For Dean.” Dad sighed and smiled. “I hope he likes it. Let’s go back before they wonder where we are.”

Dad took the invoice from Castiel’s hand and put it back in his pocket.

“Wait. You’re not going to tell me to stop the contract?”

Dad peered at him. “Would you?”

“No.”
“That’s what I figured. But son, when it ends…remember the Starbucks, will you?”

What did that mean?

Dad turned around then, and Castiel turned out the lights before following. Remember the Starbucks? Oh.

Dad was asking him to remember the first time he saw Dean. How he’d stood there with a too-hot latte searing his hand, caught by Dean’s kind smile and wished that he’d walked up, said something, tried to talk to him.

The spark.

But Castiel would know if he was in love. He’d been in love before, he knew how it felt, how it left no room for doubt.

There was a fire on the hearth, seasoned logs burning their scent into the air. The table stood abandoned, cleared of everything but a dessert plate at Castiel’s seat, with a vacuum carafe sitting ready.

Laughter carried along the barrel vaulted ceiling. Dean stood with his arm around Anna. Sarah held a whiskey glass to her lips, and popped her eyes open in shock as she recounted a story, and Dean roared again.

Warmth rushed through Castiel at the sight of him. He wanted to claim Dean away from his sister, stand with Dean’s fingers hooked through the belt loop at his hip.

Dean looked up as if he felt Castiel staring at him. His smile spread, but something in Castiel’s face made him falter. He crossed the room and took Castiel’s hands in his, watching him with dampened worry.

“Are you okay?”

It couldn’t be.

He couldn’t be.

“I’m fine,” Castiel said. “Just a little tired.”

“I saved you dessert and coffee.” Dean walked backward, still holding Castiel’s hand. “Have a bite, and we’ll go to bed early.”

Dean poured Castiel’s coffee and sat down beside him. “If you’d been five more minutes I was going to eat it myself.”

“Lucky thing I arrived in time.” A slice of mille crepe tiramisu sat on the plate, topped with fine chocolate shavings and a yellow-orange Cape gooseberry, petaled with its husk.

He loved tiramisu. He pushed his fork down the layers of thin crepe and mascarpone cream cheese, capturing his first favorite bite off the tip.

He raised his fork higher and offered it toward Dean’s mouth. Dean closed his lips over the fork tines, rumbling an “mmm” that set the fork humming against Castiel’s fingertips.

He desperately wished that they were alone.
Dean watched the second bite slide into Castiel’s mouth. Creamy soft custard streaked by fine chocolate, rich espresso, just a splash of dark rum—

“No wonder you were ready to steal my piece. This is outstanding.”

“I make mine with hazelnut liqueur,” Dean said. “I’ve got to make it for you.”

They would eat it at the new table, even if they had to sit on it as if it were a picnic. Castiel would feed him every bite.

He cut another piece with the side of his fork and held it out. Dean misjudged, and a smear of cream and chocolate powder smudged his lip.

“You’ve got—” Castiel pointed at his mouth. “Here, let me.”

He wiped the smudge with his thumb. Dean caught it in his lips, tongue darting out to lick the pad clean. Castiel’s heart hammered in his chest. His whole body pulsed. Dean watched him with his gold-starred green eyes, wickedness dancing in them, and Castiel knew exactly what Dean wanted to do when they got up to their room alone.

“Finish your dessert, Cas. You’ve hardly eaten a thing.”

“You seem a little hungry yourself.”

Dean’s smile set his skin tingling. “Starving.”

Castiel ate a little faster.

***

Dean couldn’t help feeling a little triumph at how Castiel rushed through his dessert. How his focus narrowed so much that Dean may as well have been the only one there.

No one tried to keep them chatting after Castiel’s fork clattered to the plate and he stood up. There were a few fondly amused looks, and Dean avoided looking at the corner where Michael talked to Castiel’s mother. They twined their little fingers together as they waited for the elevator.

The bell rang. The doors slid open, and they stood in the middle of the empty car as the doors slid closed. Castiel shoved Dean into the corner and kissed him hard, his hands wrapped tight around Dean’s biceps.

“There’s a surveillance camera,” Dean said between kisses that had him leaning against the wall for support.

“I hope they’re thrilled.”

Castiel wedged one knee between Dean’s legs and kissed him until the car lurched to a stop. They raced down the hall, key cards already in hand. Dean hadn’t even let the door click shut behind him before he was on his knees, opening just enough of Castiel’s clothes to get Cas’s cock in his hand and then pressing his tongue down and filling his mouth.

“Oh, but if he could—Dean pressed forward a little more, daring another inch, pulling back when
his throat heaved. He needed to slow down. Castiel’s fingers clenched, pulling tight, and Dean groaned again, tongue and soft palate vibrating.

Castiel trembled, trying to stay still. To not lose control and thrust into Dean’s mouth. Dean’s next hum was amused, and Cas did push a little, thrilling over Dean’s skin.

He drew back. “Do it.”

Castiel didn’t go too deep, but he went far enough. Dean’s scalp throbbed where Cas pulled his hair, but it made his head swim with euphoria. He kept his lips tight, his teeth back, and rode the tight, shallow thrusts of Castiel’s cock. He breathed in the sandalwood and musk smell of Castiel’s skin, tasted salt and precome on his tongue and it was so damn good.

Dean opened his mouth wider, asking for more.


Dean looked up and even in the shadows Castiel’s eyes drew him in. Castiel’s mouth fell open as their eyes met, and his eyebrows knit together, nostrils flaring.

“Pull off now,” he warned, but Dean wouldn’t. He wanted it all, and he sucked so Castiel’s eyes popped wide open and squeezed shut, lips pulled back as the tension snapped.

Dean swallowed the bitterness down, gentle and careful. Castiel pulled away and hauled Dean to his feet, leading him to the bed.

“Let me go for a minute,” Dean said. “I need to get ready.”

“Your turn.”

“Don’t need one.” Dean kissed him again. “I need to get ready.”

The meaning sunk in, then, and Cas let him disappear into the bathroom. Cas was in bed when Dean came out, lube and condoms on the nightstand.

Now they were slow. Castiel started winding a path of kisses that wandered from ear to ear, down his throat and over his collarbones, over every sensitive half-ticklish spot on his belly. Dean let his legs fall open for Castiel, half drowning in fuzzy, selfish pleasure.

Cas kept him relaxed with kisses and whispered praise, gentle fingers smoothing down tension. He cupped Dean’s balls together and licked that one hairless spot on the underside, sucked the sensitive parts into his mouth and Dean pushed against Castiel’s mouth for more. “Fingers?”

Castiel’s answer was to kiss down between Dean’s legs, lower and lower.

Dean groaned, catching the backs of his knees and pulling them toward his shoulders.

The first swirl of Castiel’s tongue curled his toes. Dean tried to spread wider, greedy for more of Castiel’s lips and tongue on him there. “Cas, Cas that’s so good—”

Castiel made his tongue a rigid point and pushed inside, sliding wet and rippling. Dean had his elbows in the back of his knees now, hands on his ass and pulling wide. He was dizzy. His cock was rock hard and leaking over his belly and he wanted—

“More,” he said. “Get me ready, I want you, Cas, please.”
Cas liked it when he said please.

“You really want this?”

“Fuck yes.” He’d been wanting it for weeks, always preparing to go that far but finding release with Cas in a hundred different ways, all of them great. But he wanted Cas inside him, stretching him wide and taking him deep. Castiel’s fingers were strong and clever, touching him exactly right. Cas delighted in how Dean loved a p-spot massage, that itch he couldn’t scratch by himself. He smiled down at Dean now.

“On your stomach is easier.”

“Next time, Cas. I wanna see you.” Look into his eyes, kiss him, see his face when he came…and one more thing.

Castiel had three fingers inside him now, stretching and firm, so careful.

“Cas. How about we don’t use the rubber?”

Castiel stilled. “You want that?”

“Yes.”

He spread his fingers. “Are you sure?”

“Cas I wanna feel you. Just you, nothing else.”

Castiel bit down on his lip. “Dean. You—Okay. Okay.” Excitement sped his fingers. “We can do that.”

“Do it now, Cas.”

He spread lube over his cock with a trembling hand. Like he couldn’t believe it was going to happen. Dean reached up to touch Castiel’s face. “Hurry.”

“I’ll hurt you.”

Dean almost didn’t care. He wanted Castiel close, ached to feel him. But Cas wouldn’t let him rush. When the slick tip of Castiel’s cock nudged up right where Dean wanted him, he wished he could wrap his legs around Castiel’s waist and make him. He felt empty.

“Need you.”

“Slow. Breathe.”

Cas pushed. Dean breathed—and gasped.

“Sorry, hold still, hold still—” It stung and stretched and Dean’s body resisted, tensing. Castiel stayed where he was, holding himself still, breathing easy. He was so strong. “Okay.”

They gained another fraction, another, until Cas was close enough to kiss. “Does it feel different?”

There wasn’t anything like it. “Yeah. It’s good. It’s you.”

This was different. Closer, warmer, Dean didn’t have words for it. He looked up and Castiel looked back, and the rush of warmth and pure feeling stole Dean’s breath. He’d never felt this.
Dean smiled. “It’s awesome.”

Castiel hooked Dean’s legs over his biceps. Hands freed, Dean dragged Cas in by the neck and kissed him. He felt full—like he was going to overflow with feelings, too many to hold in or—he didn’t know what. But it would be okay.

He was with Cas.

“You okay?” Castiel’s voice was just louder than a whisper, deep and soft.

He licked his lips, blinked. “Cas, I—”

“It’s all right. I’ve got you.” He raised himself up a little, leaning on the V of Dean’s thighs. “You feel good. Just like this.”

And then he moved. Slow, and Dean felt the pieces of him shiver apart. “Oh God, Cas.”

“Dean.” Castiel dug his teeth into his lower lip, never once stopping that slow, long stroke. It dragged along his rim and stretched him wide.

Dean dragged in a tattered breath. “Faster.” He was going to — he still didn’t know what. Like he was going to cry, but he’d never do that. He wasn’t sad. He felt—

“I’ve got you.” Castiel’s hips sped up. “It’s okay. Let go.”

But Dean held on, scrabbled to hold on even as he reached up to touch Castiel’s face, held tight as Cas turned to kiss his palm, strangled the moan before it could get loose.

“Dean.” Faster now, harder, and Dean dug down to keep from spilling over but Cas was so strong and he didn’t stop. His cock jumped and bounced and he wrapped his hand around it, his breath coming out in a loud grunt.

“Yes.” Harder now, and Dean lost the edge of a moan, the first stone tumbling downhill. “Yes. Don’t stop.”

“I won’t.” Castiel moved faster, changed angle, and Dean dug his fingers into Castiel’s shoulder. The feeling spilled over and made Cas the world, made him everything, the only thing.

Sparks lit behind his eyes and dashed over his skin, every fine hair standing on end. He didn’t know what he said, only that he said something that made Castiel’s eyes light up and his lips part just before he screwed them up tight and Dean felt him come, not just the jumping spasms but a rush of warmth filling him. It was too much, but Dean had already tightened his fist and pumped harder, racing to come, come now.

His breath shuddered and caught. Wetness trickled into his ears. He felt like they were high above the world, that he could look out the window and touch a star.

Castiel pulled back, and the moment they became two was awful. He reached for Castiel, caught his arm. “Come back.”

“I’m here. Come on, you want to get up.”

He didn’t. He wanted to lie right here and—

Dean gasped. “I want to get up.”
Castiel chuckled. “Come on then, meet you in the shower.”

***

Everything about sleeping in the same bed with Dean felt so right. Castiel lay curled around Dean’s back, every inch from chin to toes wrapped around his deliciously bare skin. He curled his hand around the softness of Dean’s belly and kissed a line from the back of Dean’s neck to his shoulder. He should sleep, but Dean’s voice kept him awake, the words whirling around his head: *I want to do this forever.*

Castiel was no fool. People said things when they had sex that they didn’t mean, even if they were true. Until he said it when Cas wasn’t bottomed out inside him, it didn’t really count. But the words stayed inside him, making him warm, making him worry. If Dean really wanted to, could Castiel?

He thought of Ennis. He couldn’t forget him. Memories of him weren’t as sharp around the edges. He could think of Ennis, remember him, but he was gone—

The tearing pain didn’t rend him. He didn’t fly from the thought: *Ennis is dead, and he’s never coming back.*

Castiel swallowed spines in his throat. Had he shoved Ennis aside? He hadn’t. The love, the pain, they were still there. Dean hadn’t erased that. But where did he belong?

Their contract was going to be over. According to the schedule, they were supposed to drift apart. Castiel would get busy with work, attend Sam’s wedding, and then it would be over. Castiel would pay the last installment, and their relationship would end.

Castiel didn’t want it to end. But it had to. The contract, the agreement, all those things colored what they did. Even now, when the lines between Dean’s role and what they did in private had been wiped out by them dancing all over it.

Their relationship had to end, if they were going to do it right. Close that chapter, start anew…yes.

Yes, that was it. They’d end the contract. And then Castiel would ask Dean to have dinner with him, and they could start over, do it right. Dinner at Hy’s, and then dancing in Robson Square.

Now he could sleep.
Dean sprawled over the king sized bed, sore and happy. He’d made Castiel late in getting to Ezekiel’s room. He doubted they would stay late at the reception. Castiel had taken his tux along so Dean couldn’t drag him into bed in the interlude between the ceremony and the reception. That had made Dean warm all over even as he called Castiel a chicken.

“I know what will happen if I’m alone with you,” Castiel said.

“Show me again.”

“Insatiable,” Castiel scolded, and left Dean alone to wash and shave and dress. He picked out his ivory suit, paired it with Castiel’s coral tie, and was ready an hour before he had to go downstairs.

Sam wasn’t around on Skype. Chuck was probably either asleep or freaking out over revisions. Dean clicked around Facebook and checked his RSS feed for something interesting when an alert for his gmail popped up on the lower right corner.

The email had a subject: *I think I might be gay. Can you help?*

Dean slipped back to his old email and read.

*Dear Mr. Winchester;*

*How do you know that you’re gay? My best friend kissed me last night. I got a hardon, faster than I ever had kissing a girl. But he pulled away and said sorry and he took off. He won’t answer my texts. I should be freaked out. I am freaked out, but it’s because my friend won’t talk to me, not because he kissed me. What do I do?*

What did he do? Dean never really had this problem. But he should try to help. Tell him something.

*Hey,*

*Give your friend a little space. If you can really mean it, tell him you’ll forget all about it if that’s what he needs. I hope it’s not the end of your friendship. As for how you know? Well, have you thought about it before? I figured it out pretty fast, because I got crushes on guys and girls in school. Any crushes on guys? Even your secret thing for Chris Hemsworth is on the table. :)*

*Honestly, you don’t really have to know right away. And you don’t have to do anything about it until you want to and you’re with somebody you can trust.*

*Dean*

He sent the message before he had a chance to change his mind.

He shouldn’t have. He wasn’t supposed to.

Just like he wasn’t supposed to click on the message with a blank subject.

*the truth will come out and everyone will know what you really are.*

She was supposed to get tired of this. Ignore her and she’ll go away. That wasn’t how it worked. It didn’t work in school and it wasn’t working here.
He set his hands on the keys.

*Look, Cas and I enjoy each other’s company. I know that you have a lot of strong feelings for Castiel but the truth is that he’s gay. It’s not your fault, but he’d never be into you. I know that probably hurt to hear and I’m sorry. But somebody had to tell you so you can move on.*

*Dean*

He closed the laptop. Somebody had to tell her. Just leaving her screaming into the void wasn’t helping anybody.

He got dressed with a little disquiet, but it faded by the time he went through his collection of tiny fragrance vials. It was a special occasion, wasn’t it? He picked out his bottle of Castiel’s favorite and dabbed it on his neck. A little dark for the afternoon, but it would be completely blended by evening.

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Mt. Stephen Hall belonged inside a castle. The long, stark stone hall looked like it could hold a throne or long trestle tables. Dean sat in his white and green organza covered chair, one of the first guests to arrive to sit on Zeke’s side of the hall. The Komarek side burst with athletic young men in tailored suits and dental implants. Dean recognized the identical, strawberry blond twins who sat in the same row on the other side of the aisle, and a few more faces besides. The rest were Komareks: broad faced, rosy cheeked and smiling, their blond hair shining like flax, thin and precious on their heads.

Sand coloured stone held up a vaulted ceiling of carved mahogany panels. Wrought iron chandeliers hung lit and glowing over the central aisle. The long white runner was bare of anything that might cause Joel to step wrong on his prosthetic and fall, but the front of the room was a bower of white roses and baby’s breath.

Someone moved into his row, and Dean got ready to make small talk as he turned to smile. That smile faded as Michael sat down next to him.

“I know about the contract.”

Fuck. What did he say? “Contract?”

Michael produced a sheet of paper. Dean unfolded it and read the masthead: Spengler and Zeddmore, LLP. His heart was in his mouth as he read the details: File 779 Contract Winchester/Novak.

It was the bill Castiel insisted they get.

“Come with me.” Michael walked through one of the hall’s stone arches. He chose a corner well away from the mingling crowd, smug smile on his face.

Dean wanted to scrape that smile against the rugged stone wall. Fucking Michael, again. The anger carried him to the corner, helped him give Michael a cold impatient stare. “What do you think you know?”

“He hired you to pose as his boyfriend, to come to these weddings with him. It’s a sham.”

Dean folded the paper along its crease lines, his expression bored and arrogant. He didn’t owe Michael any deference, and he’d die before he showed fear. “Now don’t you feel silly, offering all
that money to get rid of me?”

“Like you’re going to walk away when this is over. I know what Castiel’s like when he gets foolish notions in his head. He’s forgotten that this was a business deal. You must be quite effective.”

Dean sighed and rolled his eyes. “And you’re a douche, Michael. What the fuck do you want?”

“The contract’s over. You’ve fulfilled your obligation and performed well. You have a lot of talent.”

Dean folded his arms and said nothing.

Michael tried to smile. The knuckles on Dean’s right hand itched.

“Here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to leave Banff tomorrow. You’re going to walk out of Castiel’s life, job well done. And I’m going to make you a star.”

“That’s the carrot. What’s the stick?”

“I gave you a copy of that invoice. It goes to every celebrity rag in north America. Full blast. You’ll be ruined.”

“You wouldn’t do that to Castiel. You can’t. You’d ruin him just as hard. He’ll never be able to have a public relationship again.”

Michael shrugged. “He was doing fine on his own.”

“You…asshole. No. I don’t believe it. You’d all wind up in the crosshairs. You wouldn’t.”

Michael produced an iPhone. He unlocked it and showed Dean an image of the invoice. “Let’s give E Online the scoop, shall we? Internet spreads news faster than measles at a prep school.” He attached the file to an email, and lowered his thumb.

“Stop.” Dean put his hands up. “Erase that. Erase it. Damn you, don’t do this to him.”

“Don’t do this to him?” Michael cocked his head. “He said you were kind.”

Dean trembled. His nails dug into his palms. Just one shot, his gut begged. Just one.

But one would become three would become someone dragging him off. Assault charges. That was a row of dominoes he couldn’t knock over any more than he could tell Michael to shove it. He’d destroy his brother and call it an act of mercy.

He flexed his fingers. Breathe. Breathe. He found his center, held onto it. He couldn’t let Michael hurt Cas. He couldn’t.

“I’ll leave during brunch.”

Michael nodded once, slowly. “That’s a good boy.”

Hot rage flashed over his scalp like chain lightning. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Language,” Michael tutted. “I’ll get you a more powerful agent. You should have a script within a week. How does Roland Deschain sound?”

“Are you kidding me?”
Michael smiled. “Not at all. I can make it happen. You’ll see.”

“No,” Dean said. “I won’t. I won’t take your help, Michael. I don’t care. I’ll work in a dish pit before I sell my soul to you. Now get the fuck away from me, and never speak to me again.”

The string quartet began with two electrifying chords, and Dean turned away, slipping between one of the stone arches to take his seat.

A minute later, Michael walked past with Hael on his arm, humming the melody.

The last guest took a seat, the quartet paused, and began again. Dean knew this song. The words unspooled in his head: Oh, my love, my darling...

It was a song about limerence. It was a question. The ceremony was the answer: Yes. Dean let the music center him. He pushed Michael away, went deep and found Dean Winchester, an actor who found himself at the wedding of a fallen hockey hero and an award winning director. Castiel’s plus one.

Ezekiel walked down the aisle, Castiel at his side. They reached the end of the walk and turned around, Ezekiel’s face lighting up, alive with happiness.

The attendees rose and turned.

Joel Komarek walked between his mother and father, holding their hands. Radiance glowed from his eyes, his smile, and he looked nowhere but at Ezekiel. He was the sun of the room, but Dean stole a glance at Castiel.

Castiel looked back at him, and warmth ignited just over his heart. A rush of feeling brimmed over, threatened to spill, and Dean laid his hand over his heart as if he could hold it in.

He couldn’t look away.

I love him.

That’s what this was. That’s what it meant. This was how it felt to love someone so much you wanted the rest of your life tangled with theirs.

He loved Castiel. More than anything, anyone, ever.

And he had to walk away.

***

It had taken hours to get to this moment, but Castiel had Dean in his arms. Other couples danced on the fringes, but he and Dean took the center, their bodies nearly glued together as they stepped through the tango they’d practiced for days. Their faces turned away from each other, they moved in their space, lunged with deep knees and smouldering looks.

Dean followed with unthinking trust and precision, his hold high and close, his right hand in Castiel’s left loose. Their steps became serpentine; Dean twisted in his arms and kicked his leg up, turning to weave through the steps. He made it look easy, elegant and strong, but something wasn’t right.

They ended the song locked in a kiss that had people cheering. Dean smiled at him, and tugged his hand to lead him off the dance floor. “Have a drink with me?”
They held hands in the drink line. Dean bumped his shoulder, squeezed his fingers, everything perfect, precise, practiced.

Castiel leaned over and whispered in Dean’s ear. “Are you okay?”

Dean turned to him. Smiled. “I’m fine. Just a little tired.”

“You seem like you’re holding it up.”

“A bit,” he confessed. “But we can stay, I’m okay.”


Something had changed.

Castiel touched his cheek. “We’ll do what you want.”

Dean scanned the crowd. “Let’s say goodnight.”

They found Zeke and Joel nearby. Joel hugged Dean close. “You were great! I can hardly imagine what you two would do for a wedding dance.”

“Foxtrot,” they said together, and Castiel laughed. “Our first dance was a foxtrot, it only makes sense.” Their wedding dance? His belly did a slow roll. They knew what dance they’d start their life with. It ought to scare him a little.

“So spill it.” Joel squeezed Dean’s shoulder. “Weddings are contagious. Are you next?”

Ezekiel hugged Joel around the waist. “Joel, it’s too early for them to know that.”

“We haven’t talked about it,” Castiel said.

“And Cas would have to win me over,” Dean said. “Step up his game. Take it to the top, I’m talking jump the shark territory.”

“And he hasn’t done that yet?” Joel smirked.

“Ah, I’m kidding.” Dean’s smile was easy. I’m having a good time, that smile said. “We haven’t gotten to that conversation.”

“Then maybe we should leave you alone to talk about it.”

“Joel.” Ezekiel squeezed his shoulders. “No pressuring the newest couple in the room. There’s your sister. Let’s bother her about getting married instead.”

Dean gave them a fond look. “Have fun in Finland, you two. And—be happy together. Okay?”

Joel leaned on Ezekiel’s shoulder. “You, too. Be happy together.”

Dean ducked his head. “Thanks.”

Anna was next. She sipped ginger ale from a champagne flute, talking with a hockey player’s wife. Dean stole her for a dance, leading her along the floor. They canted their heads together, talking while they turned around the floor in a simple waltz. He hugged her on the dance floor, and
brought her back to dance with Mother, a waltz that had her full skirts flowing.

“He loves to dance as much as she does.”

Lucas stood by Castiel’s side, whiskey glass in hand.

“Every time they’ve seen each other, they’ve danced. They’re great.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, brother. That tango you two did was practically a fertility blessing.” Lucas smirked. “But you don’t look like a man whose mind is half in bed already, which is exactly where it ought to be.”

Castiel watched Mother and Dean. “Something’s wrong.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“I can just tell. Something happened.”

Lucas’s gaze flicked across the ballroom. “Maybe when you get him alone, he’ll tell you.”

“We’re saying our goodbyes,” Castiel said. “Goodnights, I mean.”

The song ended and Dad cut in, unable to resist the competition. He whirled Mother away, and Dean stood beside him again. “Lucas.”

Lucas raised his glass in salute. “Dean. That tango? Sexy. Dump Castiel and run away with me.”

Dean laughed, three beats of easy mirth. “I thought you were in the market for a sedan, Lucas.”

Lucas grinned broadly. “I am. I even have a deadline. Valentine’s Day, 2016.”

Dean clapped him on the shoulder. “Good work, Lucas. All that practice paid off.”

A baby. They were talking about a baby. Sarah was pregnant, and Dean had known they were trying before Castiel had figured out what all that talk of sedans was about.

“You sure you don’t want to buy my car, Dean?”

Dean laughed and shook his head. “I couldn’t afford it.”

It wasn’t a bad idea, though. If Lucas meant it. Castiel would ask him later.

“Castiel told me you were saying your goodbyes,” Lucas said.

“Yeah,” Dean said. “We’re turning in early. Hug Sarah for me. And dance with her. Every chance you get.”

A draft whispered along Castiel’s neck as Dean and Lucas shook hands. Dean stepped back to his side and hooked their little fingers together.

“Ready to go?” Castiel asked.

Dean glanced across the ballroom. “Yeah.”

Dean had to tell him what was wrong. Something was wrong. He leaned against the back of the elevator, eyes closed. Strain tensed his brow, and Castiel wanted to soothe it away, help him, do something.
“What can I do?” He asked as the door closed and Dean’s shoulders slumped.

“What can we go to bed? Can I—” Dean took a breath. “I can’t—”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to,” Castiel said. “Just let me.”

He led Dean to their room, turned around and drew him into the suite. “You can relax now,” Castiel said. “We’re in private.”

Dean flinched. “Cas—”

“I can give you a scalp massage,” Castiel pulled out a chair. “Really I’ll just be rubbing your head, but it’s the thought that counts.” Something was wrong. Something was going to happen. He patted the back of the chair. “Sit.”

“Cas.”

Cas rushed on. “I’ll take care of you, Dean.”

“Cas, I can’t do this any more.”

Castiel stood frozen as the words cut through his heart.

Dean swallowed. “I have to dissolve the contract. I have to go. I can’t do it anymore, Castiel. The role’s too hard.”

“You’re almost done.” Castiel’s voice croaked. You’re so close to finishing this.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I have to stop.”

“Why?”

“After seeing Joel and Ezekiel, I—if I don’t leave now, it’ll—” Dean swallowed, sniffed, looked away. “There’s a bus station.” His voice was strained, like he couldn’t push enough air to make it louder. “I can wait there. If it’s easier, you don’t have to be here while I pack.”

Don’t go. Don’t leave me. Stay, Stay. The words caught in Castiel’s throat, choking him. There had to be something he could say. He could win him over. Take it to the top. Jump the shark.

“Marry me.”


Dean shook his head, his lips pinned shut, his mouth a thin line.

“I can’t.” Dean’s voice was a windy whistle, forced through a clenched throat.

“Dean.”

“I’m sorry,” Dean whispered. “I have to do this.”

“Whatever it is, Dean, we can fix it.”

He was running away. From what? From him? From this?
“Stay until morning,” Castiel said. “Stay until morning, and I’ll take you to the Greyhound station myself.”

Dean wavered. He swayed, half reaching for Castiel, snatching his hand away.

“I’ll let you go,” Castiel stretched out his hand. “Stay until morning.”

Dean bit his lip. “You’ll let me go?”

“I promise.”

Dean took his hand.

Their breaths heaved against each other, their fingertips soft as air on each other’s backs. Dean’s fingers circled and drew, hitching back, lifted to trace three parallel lines across Castiel’s shoulders, rib-cage, waist. Castiel dragged him back to look into his eyes, green and gold and sorrow shining in the dark.

“I don’t want you to leave me.”

“Don’t talk about that now.” Dean leaned closer and kissed Castiel’s mouth, a soft brush of the lips opening to meet Castiel’s tongue. Slowly, Dean’s touch so light it set Castiel’s skin afire for more. *I want to do this forever.*

*Forever.*

Castiel crushed Dean close, lifted him off his feet. He took three steps to the bed and laid Dean on the turned down sheets. Castiel chained kiss after kiss along Dean’s neck, his collarbones, the notch at the base of his throat.

He had to want to stay. Castiel had to make him want to stay. He covered Dean’s body with his own, and kissed *stay* into his skin, whispered it into the palms of Dean’s hands, traced it over the vault of Dean’s ribs. *Stay.*

He touched Dean everywhere, intent on memorizing him. He wanted to remember how Dean felt, how he smelled, how his skin tasted, how the gradual fraying of his silence into moans and Castiel’s name sounded. He would carry the motion of Dean’s body with him forever, rocking under him in desire. The echo of Dean’s sharp gasp as Castiel’s cock slid in bit by tiny bit nestled in Castiel’s memory. The sight of Dean’s face while Castiel held still, waiting until the soft fluttering protest of his rim softened would play in his mind, his hand never able to catch that rhythm exactly.

He gathered up every memory, every moment, and he put them in his heart. He sank down to rest on his elbows, covering Dean’s body with his own. They panted for breath with Dean’s arms loose around his back, their skin chilling.

“Cas,” Dean said after they’d shared a thousand breaths. “I have to get up.”

The bed was cold without him, but he came back to Castiel’s arms. They hid in the layers of blankets, legs dovetailed together and foreheads touching.

“Tell me why.”

“I can’t.”
“Because it’s a secret?”
Dean’s lips fell open.

“Is it a secret, Dean?”

“Yes.”

Castiel dragged his nails over Dean’s spine, caught him for another kiss. Dean wound his arms around Castiel’s neck and kissed back.

“Do you want to leave?”

“Cas, I have to. I don’t want to.”

“Then stay with me.” Castiel gathered Dean up in his arms, covering him up. He wanted Dean warm, and safe. “Did someone threaten you?”

Dean froze.

“Someone threatened you,” Castiel said. “Who?”

“I can’t tell you. Cas, please.”

Castiel kissed him again, tasting salt on his lips. “Dean, whatever this is, we can fix it.”

“If I tell you he’ll do it.”

“He,” Castiel said. “Michael?”

Dean pressed his lips shut.

“He told you he knew about the contract.”

Dean startled under his hands. “How do you know that?”

“He told Dad, Dad told me. We talked about it.”

“And he didn’t throw me out of here?”

“No. So Michael went to you.” Hope flared in Castiel’s chest. “What did he tell you?”

“He told me he’d send the legal bill to every celebrity gossip outlet he could think of.”

“And you didn’t want the damage to your career.”

“Fuck that, Cas, he was going to make you a laughingstock.” Dean sat up. “You wouldn’t be able to date anyone else without someone wondering how much you paid them.”

Castiel didn’t want to date anyone else. “Michael cares about appearances,” Castiel said.

“He said if I wasn’t gone by tomorrow he’d do it. I believe him.”

“You still want to leave?”

“I have to, Cas. I can’t let him do that to you.”
Castiel clamped his lips together and curled his arms around Dean, stroked his hair, the back of his neck. “I’ll drive you to the bus station in the morning.”

“You’ll let me go?”

For now. “Yes.”

But he’d be back.

***

He shouldn’t have let Castiel drive him to the bus station. He’d clung to him when he should have been steeling himself to go on. But he stood in the circle of Castiel’s arms and swayed gently, kindling hope. Castiel would fix this. He’d tell his brother to kick rocks. Lucas would be on his side. Anna, probably. They’d fight it out and settle it.

Wouldn’t they?

Castiel squeezed him, his body gone stiff. Dean raised his head as the heavy diesel motor came closer.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“He’ll leak that invoice if he sees me.”

Castiel’s hands curved around his face. Dean bit the inside of his cheek, and Castiel rubbed his thumbs over the spot. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Come and get me, okay?” Dean brushed his fingertips over Castiel’s cheeks. “You promise?”

“I’ll fix this with Michael.”

The last passenger handed over her backpack and boarded the bus.

“It’s time to go,” the driver said.

Dean peeled himself away. “Be right there.”

Castiel raised one hand. “Stay.”

“We can’t risk it.” He backed up three steps. “Just--come and get me.”

Dean climbed the steps of the bus and sat in the first empty seat: on the aisle, next to a young woman in outdoor casual. She smiled at him and tossed her hair as he lowered himself into the contoured leather seat, and plugged in his laptop for him.

Dean watched through the window.

Castiel waited by the car until the bus turned a corner and drove out of sight.

The woman in the seat beside him watched him wake up his computer and sort through files. He should watch something. Something absorbing. Headphones, so he wouldn’t have to talk around the lump in his throat.

The icon signaling internet lit up, and he clicked over to skype. Sam was online. Chuck was idle. He’d probably gone to bed. Email loaded, alerts beeping for both accounts.
The folder with Margaret’s name showed one new message. He moved the mouse to click it, then moused away. He shouldn’t torture himself reading this stuff. He ignored it and checked his inbox, reading the topics of letters from fans. One was titled “thx 4 your advice.”

That must be the email he’d answered.

Hi

Thanks for your letter. It really helped. We talked. We kissed again. I think we’re gonna go out.

Dean smiled even as his heart ached. But maybe--maybe there were others like this one. People he could help. He scanned the unread topics and answered a girl who wanted to be an actor, another girl who lived in Vancouver and wanted to photograph him for a project, and a request to attend a burgerfest as a featured reviewer. He skipped the topics that looked like they wanted to talk about him and Cas, and found one that said, “Will you read my story?” with a link.

Well, why not? He clicked.

The webpage was a white screen with flashing red letters:

HE DOESN’T LOVE YOU ITS A LIE AND EVERYONE WILL KNOW

Dean tried to close the browser with a curse. The window stayed open. Dean tapped his mouse, again, again.

The woman next to him stirred. “Maybe you should reboot.”

Dsian pressed the power button and held it down. The screen flashed and went black. “Here goes nothing.”

The laptop powered on as if nothing had happened.

“Looks okay.”

“Lucky.” He gave her a smile. “I’m Dean.”

“Amelia.” She fidgeted in her seat. “I saw you. Before you got on the bus. You want to tell a complete stranger you’ll never see again about it?”

He’d have to lie through his teeth. “It’s still a little raw.”

“He didn’t want you to leave,” she said. “I think if you want to, you can work it out.”

Dean smiled at her. She meant well. “Thanks.”

***

Castiel stalked into the Angus room and found Michael three quarters of the way through a mimosa while Hael congratulated Sarah and Lucas. “Castiel, you missed the news! Sarah’s pregnant.”


Michael shrugged one shoulder and drained his glass. “Why not? Get it over with, I suppose.” He got to his feet and nabbed a second mimosa from a passing waiter’s tray, causing the other glasses to knock into each other. He tipped the glass up and drank half of it in a few strides, closing the door to the Strathcona room behind him.
“So I suppose that Dean left you.”

“You son of a bitch,” Castiel’s voice rasped. “Don’t interfere in my personal life, Michael. Do you hear me?”

“You can’t trust him, Castiel.” Michael examined the shine on his nails. “I offered him fame and a hot role and he folded like a bad hand.”

“He told me he didn’t want that.”

“Of course he told you that. On his way to Hollywood.”

He turned around in time to blink at Castiel’s fist just before it smashed down on the bridge of Michael’s nose. His expression would have made Castiel laugh if he’d watched it on a screen. Blood erupted from his nostrils in a little arc. Michael howled in pain, clapping a hand to his face.

Castiel drew his hand back, flexing his fingers.

Michael stood up, eyes screwed shut with the pain. “You broke my nose!”

“Next it’s your teeth.” His blood rushed, but he held back. “You don’t know him, Michael.”

“Neither do you. He’s an actor, Castiel. You know why people become actors?” Michael sounded like he had a bad cold. Blood flowed down his chin. “Because they want to be loved. Because they want to be adored. Because it fills them up.”

“Shut up.”

“He probably couldn’t help what he did to you.” Michael wiped blood off his lips. “You read that background. When did he ever marry anyone? Move in with them? Did he tell you about his first love, Castiel?”

The question ran him through.

“Did he?”

_It’s okay, Cas. I don’t really know what I’m missing._

Castiel turned his face away.

Michael settled his unbloodied hand on Castiel’s shoulder. “You’ll see that I’m right. It will hurt. I’m sorry. But it would have only hurt worse later.”

Castiel shook it off. “You need a doctor. Go ask the concierge.”
Dean’s interview was at 2:30, and he was nearly late.

He ran the last two blocks up Robson Street, slowing to a walk when he reached the corner of Thurlow. He took the tiled stairs two at a time and smiled at the hostess. “I’m here to see Duane for an interview?”

The patio was empty of diners. She led him to a table in the corner and he sat down to wait. Duane came out a minute later in a logo-embroidered golf shirt and Dockers. Dean had arrived in slim cut trousers and his favorite shirt, the blue windowpane check he’d bought at Burberry. Duane gave his clothes a discomfited look and glanced over some papers with handwritten notes.

“You’ve worked at a number of upscale restaurants, Dean, but never longer than a few months. Why the turnover?”

Dean folded his hands and leaned back. “I was trying to break into acting. Sometimes I couldn’t manage to juggle the schedule.”

“And you’re no longer pursuing acting?”

Crowley had called him ten minutes after he’d closed the door to his own bedroom. He’d answered the phone with a clogged voice and a stuffed nose.

Go to LA, Crowley had said, his voice crackling with excitement.

The role was Roland Deschain.

“I am not,” Dean said.

More calls came for more films. Smaller roles. Supporting actors, sidekicks, comic roles. Michael had held up the end of the bargain Dean had refused and put his name in everyone’s ear. He asked Crowley to take his picture off the website and thanked him for his support. He wasn’t going to take any damn help from Michael.

His bank balance sat at $100,319.77. It was time to get a job.

“It says here that you’re not available for the weekend of May 30th.” Duane consulted the application form Dean had to fill out even though he had a resume.

“That’s correct,” Dean said. “My brother’s getting married that weekend, and I’m the best man.”

“That’s too bad.” Duane set the application down. “We’re especially busy during that period. I wouldn’t be able to spare an employee the time.”

This was the third failed interview this week. Was he blackballed? Maybe his clothes were a problem. Maybe he should go crawling back to Hy’s.

Duane tapped his resume. “Honestly Dean, with a resume like this, you should be applying to places in the better hotels. If you’re looking to grow your career with your base experience, I don’t see why you’re applying at family dining. If you can hold out until after your brother’s wedding—”

“I can’t.”
Duane gave his three hundred dollar shirt another look. He shifted his jaw to the left, looking up at the sky. A seagull landed on the retaining wall of the restaurant patio and spread wings nearly as wide as Dean’s outstretched arms.

Duane tilted his head. “Marco’s fixing to quit. He’s called in sick three times in the last month. Do you have any kitchen experience?”

“Not formally,” Dean said. “But you know how it is, when you’re slammed you do your bit.”

Duane nodded. “I need a floater. Someone I can call to fill in what needs to be done when somebody flakes out. You’ll tend bar, bus tables, hell, you might even wind up in the dish pit. If that doesn’t send you screaming to the nearest five star hotel before you need to stand up for your brother, we’ll talk again. You interested?”

He could do better. But rent day was coming, and no one was going to give him five days off this early in a hire.

“I’ll do it.”

They shook hands on it.

Two hours later Dean was frying onion rings on the dinner shift, his black and white checked dungarees stiff and harsh on his thighs. His share of the kitchen tip out was $14, and the smell of onions stuck to his skin on the long bus ride home.

***

Castiel hung his suit bag and left the suitcase in the hall. Teak, furniture polish, basil and sage scented cleaner hung in the air.

He couldn’t go in there.

“Please identify yourself,” Majel said.

“Hello, Majel.”

“Hello, Castiel. It is good to hear your voice. You have seven messages. Would you like to hear them now?”

Messages. Dean might have left him one. “Play the first message.”

The first message wasn’t from Dean. By the fourth message, he shuffled heavy feet across his reception room and into the kitchen, where a note of citrus joined the bouquet of cleaning products. He kept his eyes down and turned his back to the breakfast bar. The next one would be Dean, telling him he got home okay.

It was Ezekiel.

“I wish I could be there,” he said. “I’m sorry, Castiel. I’m going to explain it to Joel, because he can’t do anything but hope you two work it out. He might kill me.”

Castiel rubbed his chest and took shallow breaths. They burned. He could use Zeke right now. Zeke knew the truth. Would Zeke agree with Michael? Was that what he was warning Castiel about, that Dean would walk away?

Castiel opened the fridge. An unopened bottle of milk sat on the shelf. Carefully wrapped and
labeled wedges of cheese remained in the deli drawer, but the meats and bread were gone. For a miracle, the avocado was within the fragile window of eatable.

Castiel closed the refrigerator door and leaned against it. Dean walking away had been in the plan. Zeke hadn’t worried about that. He’d been warning him about getting too close, accidentally bringing his heart along.

Castiel wanted to talk to him, but Joel had chosen a vacation cabin that didn’t have Internet access. He was without his best friend for the next three weeks. He’d have to go through this alone.

Best to face it.

Castiel turned around and gripped the countertop. Face it.

The table sat in the light of the corner window, diffuse and watery with the rain that fell steadily outside. Water streamed down the western window, tracing bent paths down the centenarian glass.

He had wiped broken tracks of tears from Dean’s cheek when the bus rounded the corner and stopped for the small knot of passengers with backpacks and tickets for points west. Felt them smear on his cheek when Dean flung his arms around Castiel, squeezing tight.

Castiel had watched the bus to Vancouver drive out of sight before he had taken the Tesla back to the hotel.

That had been three days ago. Castiel had fallen into his hotel bed and stared awake on fresh laundered sheets. He’d dragged himself through an abysmal golf game that everyone forgave, and nodded through well meaning bits of advice from the last attendees.

Now he was home, afraid to look in the living room.

*Face it, Castiel.*

He walked out of the kitchen and climbed the three steps to the huge room, crossed the empty polished floor and stood in front of the table.

It really was right for the room. It had a rough hewn, organic feeling, reminding him of fossilized amber. He touched the glassy surface. It was smooth and cool under his palm.

He’d wanted Dean to see it. Dean would understand what it meant.

Maybe he still would.

Maybe Michael was wrong. The shimmer of hope ignited. It was a different kind of pain, like stretching sore muscles. He knew Dean; Michael judged Dean. That was the difference. Michael didn’t know him. What they did, what they had, it hadn’t been an act. It had been real.

He reached for his phone and had his thumb poised over the button to call Dean, but faltered. Michael was positive Dean would ride the publicity to what he actually wanted.

If Michael was right Dean would wind up in the industry news. Casting an unknown for a motion picture would raise eyebrows and generate opinion. But Dean had told him that he’d never take help from Michael. He left because he couldn’t risk Michael carrying out his threat.

“Hello, Majel.”

“Hello, Castiel. How can I assist you?”
“Check the internet for news about Dean Winchester, compile the results.”


Castiel picked up a tablet and booted it. He scanned the results, scrolling down the list.

There was nothing from industry news. Dean hadn’t taken any offers. Would he?

He had to prove to Michael that Dean wasn’t like that, or he’d never hear the end of it. Michael would never trust Dean, never accept him if he believed for a moment that Dean was using Castiel.

He’d wait. Just three more days. If Dean hadn’t appeared in a studio press release or any other news with a new role, he’d tell Michael he was wrong and call Dean.

Saturday. He could wait until Saturday.

Castiel ordered vindaloo and mattar paneer from Chutney. When it came, he ate it in the kitchen.

***

Dean had needed a server’s shift on a Friday night. His jar at home had fifty-two dollars in it, but he’d managed to make seventy five in half his shift, and he had a ten person reservation due to take the tables he’d pushed together, an automatic 18% attached to the bill.

He checked with everyone else in his section, refilled drinks, brought out baskets of endless fries. He double checked the table set. The ketchup was low. He left the floor to get a filled bottle.

The party was already seated when he got back. They were all men, most of them in red t-shirts stretched tight over broad shoulders and bulging biceps. Short haired, all of them fit and clean-cut. He stepped up and laid a menu down.

“Hi, I’m Dean, and I’ll be taking care of you today.”

“Dean.”

Dean startled at the familiar voice, locked onto the speaker’s twinkling smile. “Linus. Hey. How are you? Are these your brothers?”

“Yeah, we were doing group shots for next year’s calendar.”

Dean smiled at one handsome face after another. “Okay. Expect drinks from the ladies, fellas, but how about I start with our specials on tap. We’ve got Island Lager for 4.99 a pint—”

“A round of that,” Someone said. Linus nodded, and Dean left to pull beer. Of all the burger joints in all the towns of the lower mainland…

They’d parted on friendly terms. No reason to think Linus had gone sour on him now. He served beer and laid a pint at Linus’ hand.

“Thanks,” he said. “Are you on the closing shift tonight?”

“Yeah, I won’t be finished until close to midnight.”

“Cut me off after this beer,” Linus lifted the pint and sipped. “I’ll make sure you get home okay.”

A redhead with a smattering of freckles pushed Linus’s shoulder. “Quit hogging the honeys,
Linus.

Linus smirked. “Too bad, so sad. We’re friends, is all.”

“Then introduce me to your friend,” the redhead said.

Dean was going to be juggling eggs at this table. He put on his game face. “Hi. I’m Dean.”

***

The firefighters were pretty good. Dean delivered drinks, kept their fries fresh and hot, remembered everyone’s order. They tipped on top of the included gratuity, making the time and effort in serving pushed together tables worth it. Dean hustled his section and slipped $137 into his jeans after tipping the kitchen.

Rent, earned. Food, earned. All he had left was Hydro. He’d leave renewing Baby’s registration until later.

Dean left the darkened restaurant at 12:07 am. Linus waited downstairs, leaning against his shiny red Dodge Ram. Dean’s descent slowed. The hem of Linus’s shirt was untucked from his jeans, hiding the engraved belt buckle that was his favorite.

“Linus. You waited for me?” Dean stopped a few feet away.

“I wanted to know how you were doing.” He opened the passenger door. “Hop in.”

Dean stepped on the running board and climbed into the cab while Linus walked around the back of the truck.

“It’s nice of you to offer me a ride home.”

“Taking the bus down Hastings Street at night is dangerous.”

Dean scoffed. “Teenaged girls do it all the time.”

“In pairs.”

“How’s Daisy?”

Linus smiled and patted her dash. “She’s a peach.”

_A rockabilly cover of a Duke Ellington song played on the stereo as Linus wrestled the big truck around to head north_. “So how you doing, Dean?”

“Working, mostly.”

“I thought you did high-end dining.” Linus checked over his shoulder and turned right on Hastings Street, headed for Dean’s place.

“I had to get a job fast, and my brother’s wedding is coming up.”

“I remember.” Linus nodded along, watching for traffic.

They missed the light on Cambie. A street kid approached with a squeegee. Linus turned his visor down, displaying his badge. The kid scurried back to the corner.
“That guy, Dean. How’d that turn out?”

Dean’s heart ached. He rubbed the back of his head and watched the traffic. “It’s complicated.”

“Complicated.” Linus glanced at him. “Are you gunshy about committing, or is he?”

He reached out in the night for Castiel, thought of things he should tell Cas about before he remembered. “It’s really complicated.”

“Are you still together?”

Dean shrugged again. Castiel hadn’t called. Dean rushed back to check his phone every time he could get back to his locker, but he never called. Sam, yes. Crowley? Over and over. But nothing from Castiel.

“I’m sorry, Dean.”

“Sorry the guy I dumped you for is probably dumping me?”

Linus took his hand off the steering wheel and squeezed Dean’s knee. “I’m sorry you got hurt.”

Dean tensed. “Linus, I—”

Linus took his hand away. “Didn’t mean it like that. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

They halted at another red light. “You play it close to your chest,” Linus explained. “You make all the right moves, and they’re really good. But I never saw you look fragile before. I knew he hurt you.”

“It was his family.”

“You let them drive you off?” Linus looked surprised. “He let them drive you off? He’s not worth it, if he did.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what’s going on. You don’t want to hear about my Schroedinger’s breakup story.”

“Well.” They drove through Boundary Road and traffic dropped off. “I know a bit already. Castiel Novak.”

“You saw the stuff online?”

“I’m subscribed to your Instagram.”

“Oh wow. Ouch.”

Linus shrugged. “It’s okay. You looked happy together. But I repeat, Dean—a man who won’t stand up to his family for his boyfriend isn’t worth it.”

They turned into Dean’s neighborhood and onto Dean’s street, narrowly avoiding a pedestrian hauling a news camera across the way. The road was thick with parked cars, parked vans, people milling around right in the street.

“News vans. I wonder what happened?”
“Dean,” Linus said, slowing the truck to a crawl. “I think you did.”

“What?” Dean frowned out the windshield.

A black van’s reflective paint glittered in the truck’s headlights, a capital E made into an exclamation point. E Online.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean breathed.

“I better call for backup.” Linus picked up his radio receiver and turned the unit on. He twisted in his seat, backing into a neighbor’s driveway to get turned around. “You’re not going in that alone.”
Skating Rink

The Boyfriend Contract, they called it. The full text of their agreement was available as a PDF on all the celebrity sites on the web. It didn’t outdo Caitlyn Jenner, but there was a scrum of reporters asking for comment outside the building.

Michael had gone down to say no comment and ask them to leave. Castiel watched video of Dean escorted into his house by a cadre of firefighters and police, his only response delivered just before he retreated inside the house:

“Please, everyone. Kindly get the fuck off my lawn. Thank you.”

Canada had rubbed off on Dean Winchester.

“Why are you watching that?” Michael had walked into his office, unannounced by so much as a knock. “It’s a circus out there, thanks to him grabbing for fame.” Brown, ochre, and red-purple still bloomed under both eyes, but the swelling had gone down. That surgeon had done a good job on his nose.

“He would never do this,” Castiel said. But if he didn’t, who did?

Michael gave him a look. “So you leaked the contract?”

“He never took a role. He turned down Roland. His picture isn’t on his agent’s website anymore. He didn’t do this.”

“You don’t think so?” Michael asked. He snatched up a remote from Castiel’s desk. A high definition image of the crowd of reporters waiting to pounce roared through the silence. “This looks like 15 minutes of fame to me.”

Castiel turned away from the screen. “He hasn’t talked to anyone.”

“The longer he stays quiet, the more they’ll pay when he does speak. His pretty face will be on a talk show by the end of the week. But that’s not why I’m here.”

Great, Michael was making plans. “What now?”

“The media is gumming everything up. We’re getting you out of here.”

“I have work to do, Michael.”

Michael scoffed. “You’re shoving papers around until Zeke gets back from Finland.”

“Fine. What do you want?”

“Get on a cruise to Alaska.”

Castiel put his tablet down. “Are you kidding me?”

“You and Anna are booked. Holland America. You set sail at four. Get away from this. I can handle it.”

“Don’t you say a word against him, Michael. If you do—”
“He doesn’t deserve your protection, Castiel. Part of this is so you and Anna can strategize our response when you get back. I’ll stay here and “no comment” until I turn blue. Just get away from the whole thing, would you?”

“If you hadn’t interfered—”

“He’d be taking you for every dime he could, while you believed in a fairy tale,” Michael said.

“Are you trying to goad me into punching you again?”

“I did what was best,” Michael said. “You can hate me for it if you want to. But I’d go back and offer him more that night at the Arctic Club. Millions, if it saved you from those weeks. It’s what he asked for.”

“What?”

“He asked me for 67 million dollars.”

That was a lot of money. “He was angry, insulted.”

“He’ll talk,” Michael said. “He’ll tell his version and pocket the money. He’ll make enough buzz that he’ll end up in something.”

“Go away, Michael.”

“You need to go home and pack. Get on that ship, Castiel.”

Castiel stood up. “I will. It’s two weeks where I don’t have to listen to you. And then we’ll see who’s right.”

***

The media found out where he worked. They blocked the stairs up to the patio, flashbulbs popping, endless questions. It took ten minutes just to get inside, and they huddled down there, blocking the way for customers.

The customers inside erupted when he walked out of the kitchen with a tub for dirty dishes and started wiping tables. A couple of them even followed him and his tub of used dishes into the kitchen, babbling questions.

It had taken a squad of cops to clear reporters out of the Red Robin, with threats of tickets and obstruction charges to get rid of the most persistent.

Dean just wanted to sink into the floor. The way everyone looked at him, the questions they didn’t ask floating in front of them like thought balloons—he could see what they thought of him, of what he’d done. He couldn’t face these people again.

So he didn’t put up a fight when Duane let him go that night.

“Sorry, Dean. It’s too much disruption. You’re a great worker, flexible, can-do attitude, a real team guy, but it’s the circumstances.”

Dean nodded, shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Here’s your pay. I didn’t deduct taxes, so do your math at the end of the year.”
“Thanks Duane. It’ll help right now.” Dean had forty hours on that paycheck. Without deductions, it was nearly three hundred and sixty dollars. He had rent. Barely.

At least I have a tuxedo. But next month was coming, and his notoriety would make getting another job even harder.

He checked his phone, but he knew what he’d see: no call from Castiel. Ava had told him that Michael had ordered Dean banned from the premises, changing Castiel’s personal phone number. “I shouldn’t even be talking to you,” she’d said.

“Is he okay, Ava? Tell me he’s okay.”

“Well, Dean, why do you want to know?” She’d asked.

“Because I ca—”

She hung up. Whether to hide the call or because she wouldn’t hear what Dean had to say, he didn’t know. When he tried to call her back, her number was out of service.

There were four messages from Crowley, however. Dean bit his lip and left the restaurant, looking left and right for reporters. He owed Crowley the courtesy, at the very least. He played the first message, walking down Robson with his baseball cap pulled low.

“I don’t care what time it is when you get this message,” Crowley said. “Call me.”

All the rest said the same thing. Crowley didn’t want him to quit acting. He didn’t understand, and Dean would have felt like a fool explaining it to him.

But he stood by Dean, still taking calls and requests for appearances even though he was volunteering his time to reject them.

Dean couldn’t go back to acting. He couldn’t take help from Michael, and Michael had done it anyway. No matter what roles he took, Michael’s hands would be on it. He’d never know if he’d earned it.

Crowley would probably think it was stupid.

Dean avoided eye contact with other pedestrians and dialed his former agent, listening to the phone ring once, twice.

“Dean. Is that you?”

“Hi Crowley. I just got fired.”

“I’m sorry. Care to tilt at another windmill, or will you rise from the ashes?”

“I can’t go back. Not to acting.”

“I’ve read the actual contract, you know. Surprisingly well-written and easy to interpret. I also noticed you stiffed me for my fifteen percent.”

Dean winced. “Sorry. I want to give it back.” Sorry, Uncle Bobby. That was the only thing holding him back. He'd find some other way to send them some money.

“Dean, Dean, Dean. Why are you noble types so willing to sacrifice yourselves? Have you even heard from Castiel?”
“No.” He paused at the corner of Burrard, letting a cyclist cross the intersection. “Michael’s shut me down. I can’t get to him.”

“What if I told you there was a way for you to get your message out?”

“What? No, Crowley. No way.”

“Missouri Moseley’s offering seventy five thousand. Not bad for a day’s work.”

“She’s going to ask me about being Castiel’s rent boy,” Dean said. “That’s all they want to hear.”

“Seventy five thousand dollars, Dean. Minus fifteen percent.”

He jogged to make the light. “I can’t fly.”

“I’ll go with you. Or you can use my Xanax.”

A news van prowled along the street. Dean turned into the closest shop window, gazing at Italian shoes and avoiding the driver’s curious glance. “How will it look?”

“As good as you make it.”

Dean shook his head. It was crass. Sordid. He wouldn’t stoop to that any more than he’d take one of those Michael-tainted roles.

“I really don’t want to, Crowley.”

“I know. You don’t want the talk show appearances, you don’t want the jobs I’ve got lined up out the door—not even after you get sacked from your ridiculous penance at a franchise. What do you want, Dean? I think it’s time you figured that out.”

“I know I’m a pain in the ass.”

“But you’re my pain in the ass, chum. Call me in the morning or I’ll fear the worst.”

“Don’t worry about me, Crowley. Good night.”

He hung up and shoved the phone in his pocket. He crossed Hornby street, swerving around a street performer eating fire for a crowd. No one looked twice at him. Dean was just another young man on the street. Baseball caps were enough to make people look at him suspiciously, but he kept to his business.

He watched the busker juggle and dance for dollar coins and a jaded audience. She was good, flexible and expressive. He wondered if she had an agent, and dropped one of Crowley’s cards into her hat along with a handful of loonies.

“Merci, monsieur.” She blew him a kiss.

Dean spotted a photographer and turned away, descending the stairs to the rink under Robson Square. The scrape of his footsteps echoed as he crossed the rink to stand in the center of smooth concrete. No dancers turned on the floor tonight, and he stood there alone.

How empty it was. How shabby, with pocked brutalist columns of concrete and harsh sodium lights. A ketchup-smeared napkin from a hot dog cart lay crumpled on the ground next to a dented Coke can. He’d wanted to come back here for another date, after Castiel had taken him to luxury hotels and castles in the mountains? After they’d danced under a dome built with Klondike gold?
But Castiel had watched the sea of dancers with light in his eyes, had led Dean around the floor with the traveling step he remembered from his school days. He’d asked Dean to marry him. He’d asked Dean to stay, but Dean stood alone, down to his last five hundred bucks and no job for the next bill.

Because of his pride. The pride that made him step away from Michael’s interference. The pride that sent him to a part time job in a chain restaurant in four hundred dollar shoes.

This was what pride had gotten him.

Nothing.

But Dean knew exactly what he wanted. More than a role. More than his pride.

Dean fished the phone out of his pocket and dialed Sam.

Jess answered the phone. “Dean.”

“Jess. Am I interrupting?”

“You would have gotten voicemail five minutes ago, so your timing is good. Are you calling for your brother, or your lawyer?”

“Both.”

Jess handed over the phone, and Sam’s voice came over the line. “Dean. I saw online. They went to your work?”

“Yeah. I got fired.”

“Shit. Do you want to sue somebody?”

“Sammy, I want to give the money back.”

“The money from Cas?” A thump and a hiss of pain sounded on the line. “Stubbed my toe. You still have it?”

“I haven’t touched it,” Dean said. “I can’t keep it, Sam. Can you send the money back?”

“Are you sure? You just lost your job, you wanted to take a course…”

“It wasn’t about the money, Sammy. It started that way, but I—it got real. I can’t take money for what happened.”

“Dean. Did you fall for Cas?”

“From forty thousand feet, Sam. Return the money, will you? Certified check or whatever, whatever you need.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Me?” Dean smiled, and it cracked his face. “I’m going to take my agent’s advice.”
Michael had booked them a pair of Neptune suites nestled side by side. Castiel picked a key card and he followed his steward to Deck 10. The room was large enough for a long leather couch and a pair of tomato red tub chairs. A private veranda lay just beyond the grouping of furniture, featuring a pair of lounges and a table for four. The bathroom had a full-size tub. On an elbow high built in sideboard, an ice bucket held a bottle of — Castiel hoisted the bottle out of the ice bath by the neck — sparkling wine, but not a bad one. A bowl of fruit sat next to a Keurig coffee maker. Castiel made a face.

“You can get a full selection of espresso based drinks in the Neptune lounge,” the steward said.

“Thank you.” Castiel mentally added another ten to his tip. “Is the kitchen serving?”

“Service has begun,” the steward said.

Castiel peered at his chest, then gave up. “I’m Castiel. What’s your name?”

The steward lifted his head, eyes open a little wider. “Barry, Sir."

“Barry. Thank you for guiding me to my room. I’d like a bowl of popcorn, is there any available on the ship?”

Barry nodded. “I can have one sent to you. I hope you enjoy your voyage, Sir.”

Castiel slipped Barry a pair of bills. “How do I get Internet?”

“As quickly as possible,” Barry said. “Once the sun sets the signal’s going to die, and you’ll go dark until we make land in Ketchikan.”

“Which is in…two days.”

Barry nodded. “Any time we make port, there will be internet. There’s another stretch from Juneau to Anchorage where there won’t be any signal, as well.”

That had to be part of Michael’s plan—to get him out of the way and keep him out of touch. Unless he walked off the ship right now, there wasn’t much he could do.

“Okay, Barry. Thank you. You’ve been most helpful.”

Castiel abandoned his luggage and knocked on Anna’s door.

“Take it out. All of it.” Anna stood across the room from the honor bar and the bucket of chilled sparkling wine, fists and jaw clenched. “Why wasn’t there a request to remove the alcohol from this suite?”

“Ma’am, we apologize for the difficulty. I’ll explain the situation to our manager, and we’ll have a selection of soft drinks and juices in your suite, with all the alcohol removed,” her steward scooped the ice bucket off the shelf.

“Anna. Come with me. I’m ordering popcorn. We can sit on the veranda while they take care of your room.” He hustled her out of the suite, guiding her to the mirror image of her room just next door. “Are you okay?”
“I’m fine. I’m fine. It isn’t the first time no one bothered to lock up the booze around me.”

“Do you want to talk to your sponsor?”

“I can text her, there’s still signal here.”

Castiel eyed her. “So you knew about the no internet feature of the cruise.”

Anna shrugged. “It’s hard to get away from the world. But if you want to catch up on your reading, now’s the time.”

Castiel found his tablet and connected to the ship’s wifi. He checked his mail, found one titled RE: REQUEST FOR PARANORMAL SCRIPT LIMITED EXCLUSIVITY. The all caps was a touch irritating, but the message made him smile: Chuck Shurley had found an agent, and Pamela Barnes had the guts to dump more than twenty scripts in an email and inform him that he only had 60 days exclusive reading.

It solved his reading problem. Dean had taken his computer back, and he never found out how *In My Time of Dying* ended.

Another email caught his eye: one from Sam.Winchester@SZLLP.com. The topic read RE: Return of Payment.

Castiel’s heart caught in his throat. He tapped the message. After a formal business greeting, the message read *Our client Dean Winchester wishes to return the agreed upon payment of $100,000.00 USD. A certified check will be delivered to your office by courier.*

The message signed off with regards from Sam.

Castiel read the message again. He was sending the money back? He didn’t have to do that. What did it—

The tablet slipped out of his slack hands. Anna closed his email and held the tablet away. “You were working. No working.”

“Give that back, Anna.”

She held it as if it were a frisbee. “I will chuck it in the sound.”

“Don’t!” Castiel raised his hands and stepped back. “I just downloaded a ton of slush to read and I got an email from Dean’s lawyer and Dean wants to give the money back and I need to know why.”

Anna held the tablet behind her back, but she perked up, brown eyes focused on him. “You’re going to tell me everything, Castiel. I want the whole story.”

“Will you give me the tablet back?”

“Five minutes,” she said.

Castiel tapped out a return message. *A refund is not necessary. Mr. Winchester performed excellently and upheld his duties with skill. Every cent was fairly earned.*

He sent the message and watched the script files downloading. A new message popped up, this time from Samwise.Winchester@gmail.com. The subject was, “you sonofabitch.”
Castiel blinked.

_That was all Dean was to you? An excellent performance? Fine. Whatever._

Castiel had misstepped. Badly. “I need more time,” Castiel said.

“Two minutes or it’s going in the drink.”

“I fucked up. I have to fix it.”

“Fix it in two minutes.”

“No.” Castiel broke and ran for the suite’s bathroom, locking himself in. Anna pounded on the door.

“You have a problem, Castiel! Will you quit working?”

“Anna let me take care of this!” Castiel opened a reply and wrote, _I apologize. I misspoke. I meant to say that Dean should keep the money and I don’t want it back. I did not mean that I thought of Dean with anything less than the highest regard. He is a fine and good man with integrity._

But that couldn’t be true if he leaked the contract.

“Castiel James Novak! Open this door!”

“I can’t think with you yelling at me, Anna, please. I have to fix this!”

Anna was silent for a few moments. “What are you fixing?”

“Sam wrote to me explaining that Dean wants to give the money back. I said that I didn’t want it back because Dean did a good job. Sam wrote me back on his personal account and called me out.”

“What exactly did you say, Castiel?”

Castiel read it back.

“Oh my God,” Anna said. “And how are you trying to fix it? Read me what you said.”

She groaned halfway through. “Castiel. You _suck_ at this. You’re half bad business correspondence and half a Jane Austen novel. What were you going to say next?”

“I don’t know. I realized partway through that I believe something about Dean that can’t be true. If he’s who I think he is, then why did he leak the contract?”

“How do you know he did?”

“Because it’s all over the news, Anna”

“No,” Anna said. “How do you _know_ he did it? Where’s your proof?”

All Castiel’s words dried up. “I—don’t know. Michael—”

“How do you know Michael didn’t blow the whistle on you too?”

Castiel faltered. “Me… too?”

“Michael showed up to The Edgewater forty five minutes before Bela and I got busted in front of a
throng of reporters. He set that up to drive us apart.”

“That’s why you don’t really talk to him.” A hundred puzzle pieces clicked together and made a picture. “That’s why you booked that trip that conflicted with his wedding.”

“And now he’s put you on a slow boat to Alaska,” Anna said. “We have to get out of here.”

The ship vibrated and lurched forward. Castiel’s stomach went with it.

“Are you kidding me?” Anna yelled. “Seriously? Holy fuck. What the hell cruise ship actually disembarks on time? Write that email, Castiel. Come on out, I’ll help you.”

***

Castiel and Anna were like caged animals without Internet. Castiel had sent the message with Anna’s help, but Sam hadn’t replied before the wifi went dark. They ran on treadmills on the Lido deck, racing each other for the best time. They played tennis games that left them shaking and sweaty. They avoided the casino and the *Maasdam*’s many bars to sit with their heads together, telling each other the truth behind their individual scandals.

They repeated “*Once we get to Ketchikan*” so many times, they wouldn’t have enough minutes in the excursion to do them all. But only one thing was important—Internet access. Once Anna and Castiel got to Ketchikan, they would race for the nearest wifi and reach out to the world. Castiel would contact Sam first, but he mostly wanted to talk to Dean.

He had things he needed to say to Dean, starting with “I’m sorry.”

They’d awakened at five and run five miles on the treadmills. They ate oatmeal and fruit on Anna’s veranda, their phones consulted every minute for signal.

“Bars! I’ve got—shit, one bar. Two! One.”

“Can’t they make this tub go any faster?” Anna growled at her phone’s spinny wheel of death. Frustrated, she stuffed the phone in her pocket. “No looking for five minutes. Put it down, Castiel.”

“We’re so close,” Castiel watched the bars on his phone, muttering at them to get stronger.

“Five minutes. Come on. Let’s get ready for going ashore.” Anna clapped her hands once and pushed her chair back, completely unmoved by the forested islands their ship sailed between. She kicked Castiel out. “Change clothes! Don’t stare at your phone!”

Castiel grumbled and found some jeans, a pressed shirt, and a extra fine merino sweater to wear under a tweed jacket. He didn’t bother with shaving, and rubbed pomade in his hair to make it look artfully disheveled instead of genuinely. They made their way to the meeting area for shore excursions and milled about with silver haired cruisegoers and families with bored teenagers. One girl in braces spotted Castiel and gasped.

Castiel pretended not to see it. He stood with his phone in his hand, willing it to gain enough signal to load the 39 emails he scrolled through to find a response from Sam.

He’d worried himself into stomach pain over Sam’s response to his email, a message Anna and he bickered over sentence by sentence. Castiel hadn’t been happy with her assertion that he should write from the heart, and Anna had disliked his writing, calling it stuffy. The result probably looked incoherent.
Sam had written him back an hour after he’d lost wifi out of Seattle, his response a single, curt line:

_Tell Dean that._

There was a second message, sent a couple hours later: _But maybe not so formally. Dean’s a fan of simplicity. Be honest. Take a risk. I don’t know why I’m giving you advice. Maybe because I see how he looked at you._

_But remember what I said: If you break his heart, I will end you._

He should write to Dean. He should have done it before. He’d find a cafe with wifi, buy a soul-saving latte, and write to Dean. Take some pictures of the town, maybe. Castiel missed telling Dean about all the things. He wanted that back.

He opened a new mail message, and addressed it to Dean, and began:

_I’m sorry. I miss you. Michael tricked me into taking a cruise to Alaska and there’s no wifi or decent coffee. I’m currently waiting to get off the ship and stretch my legs in a little town called Ketchikan._

_I should have called you. I should have written earlier. You have every right to be angry at me. I was persuaded to doubt you, and I was wrong to do that._

Anna touched his shoulder. “Castiel, have you written to Dean yet?”

“I’m just doing that now.”

“Stop. Look at the TV.”

Castiel raised his head. A commercial for _The Missouri Mosely Show_ played, with the sweet-faced black woman pointing to the upper right corner where a picture of her special guest appeared.

It was Dean.

“Castiel,” Anna rubbed his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I am so, so sorry.”

The air was cloying, too many colognes mingling and clashing together. It made his head pound, a dull red-orange pain.

Castiel bent his head back to the phone, and deleted his email in progress.

“I think I’m going to lie down, Anna. I’m not feeling well.”

“Do you want me to bring you anything?”

“No.” Castiel swallowed the lump in his throat. “I don’t need anything, thank you.”

He turned toward the elevators and headed back to his room.

***

They let Dean disembark first. He fought the urge to run through the airport in search of a bathroom. He found one and leaned over the sink, breathing. He’d made it. On the ground. He was okay. He splashed water on his face, and his left contact lens popped out of his eye and rinsed down the sink drain.
“Son of a bitch.”

He had a spare in his bag. Carry-on or in his suitcase? He sorted between his laptop, his e-readers, his music player, feeling around. His fingers closed on satin brocade, and he dragged a pouch made of upcycled vintage ties out of his messenger bag. He had packed his contact lens case, but the spares must have been in his luggage. Dean slipped the right lens out of his eye and put on his glasses. They sat uncomfortably on his nose and put a frame around everything he could see, but it would have to do until he got to the hotel.

He stood on the sidewalk, transfixed.

The Tangerine looked like his childhood, if it had been shining and clean. Dean had lived in motels just like this one, only paint-peeling over decay, smelling of canned soup burning on hotplates, stale beer, and the slow crumbling of hope. He walked past a sparkling kidney shaped pool with topaz blue waters, its edges dotted with patio tables and clean white sun shades. A breeze pressed his wrinkled linen shirt to his back and ruffled his hair as he climbed fourteen stairs to the second floor, opening his room.

Memories of dirty carpets, dingy linoleum and sagging beds scattered. Dean toed off his loafers to plant sore, bare feet on cool polished concrete. He sighed at the chilled orangeflower scented air and clean white walls that drew the eye to the abstract, full-wall mural behind the head of a king-sized bed. He set his bag on an orange-red chair sitting next to a round table and flopped diagonally across the mattress. Weariness pressed him into the cradle of memory foam and he closed his eyes, just for a minute.

Crowley’s seven am phone call woke him. He stumbled to his bag and pulled out his phone. “I’m up, I’m up.”

“I don’t believe you. How many Xanax do you have left?”

“I took two.” They had helped take the edge off, and Dean maybe shouldn’t have had that gin and tonic, but he didn’t want to know what he would have been like without it.

“Not bad. How do you feel?”

“Dehydrated. I slept too long.”

“March yourself to the bathroom, I’m not hanging up until you’re brushing your teeth.”

“Yes, Mom.” Dean smiled. Crowley was a more posh version of his uncle Bobby - sarcastic, grouchy, and under all that piss and vinegar he cared. He gargled in Crowley’s ear and made him hang up.

He’d accidentally packed two right lenses in his bag. He’d have to wear his glasses. On national TV. Super.

He wore a gray shirt with a plum tie, tucking them into slim cut beige trousers. He shaved and combed his wet hair into neat lines. He needed a haircut. There was no time to think about that, no time to think about anything until he was in front of the studio lights, testing the microphone clipped onto his tie.

Missouri Moseley hardly came up to his chest, but the room revolved around her, waiting on every flick of her gold-tipped pink manicured nails. Dean bent down for her hug, and accepted a chocolate macaroon that made his eyes pop when he bit into it, rich with dark chocolate and toasted coconut.
“Five minutes, Miss Moseley,”

“Thank you,” she called, and settled that warm, caring smile on him. “Don’t be nervous. Tell them about the little girl. And that night you went to see the stars.”

Dean stared. “How do you know that?”

Missouri smiled. “How do you think I know something that was never in the news, boy? Did you think I was a cold-reading carnival fraud?”

He couldn’t say yes. “I just thought it was, like a character.”

“I know you gave him back the money. I know you love him with all your heart.” She took his hand and patted it. “You want to tell him that so bad you faced your fear to come here and tell him. So let’s do it. This is your chance.”

***

Anna let Castiel mope around in his room for a day, and then she dragged him across the ship. She dragged him around the running track, shoved him in the pool, and challenged him to tennis by clucking at him in front of a crowd. She even promised to find a climbing gym when they made land in Anchorage, but she wouldn’t let him wallow, and she wouldn’t let him work.

She could be such a pain in the ass sometimes. Exercise didn’t help. Pounding out five miles on the track didn’t clear his mind. Anna beat him in straight sets. Swimming helped a little, but Castiel really wanted to set his mind to a climbing puzzle.

The night before they were due to land in Anchorage, Anna came to his room and curled up in one of his tomato coloured chairs. “I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“Bela’s going to be in Anchorage. She’s sailing back with us. I was going to tell you earlier, but—”

She shrugged.

Castiel nodded. “You weren’t expecting to have to deal with your brother in the aftermath of a betrayal.”

“I would have left it at broken-hearted, myself.” Anna smiled up at him. “We’ll still go climbing. We’ll still be together for the trip. I wanted you to have a chance to really meet Bela, get to know her.”

“You need me on your side against Michael.”

Anna let her head drop back and she stared at the ceiling. “It shouldn’t even be sides. This shouldn’t be happening. But yes. I need you on my side.”

“I’ll try to get to know Bela,” Castiel said. “It’ll give me something else to focus on.”

Anna went to bed early. Castiel stayed awake, flipping television channels. Only the in house broadcasts worked while they were at sea, so Castiel paused the channel on a replay of the ship’s professional dance troupe performing competitive ballroom dances.

He turned it off when a couple swept onto the floor to perform a foxtrot.
He swiped around on his tablet looking for something to do. He tapped into his collection of photos. The newest ones were all of Dean, or had Dean in the picture somewhere.

What had he told people in that talk show? Missouri Moseley wasn’t usually a scandalmonger, but the psychic routine was a whole zip code of weird. It made a neat premise and plenty of guests swore she was the real thing, but how could she be?

Castiel paged through photographs of Dean. Cooking. Sleeping. Dancing in the big room, when it was empty. Posing with the ferris wheel in the background. Dean wearing a black and gold striped tie, leaning against the deep mahogany wood panels next to a window in the Banff Springs Hotel. He’d posted that one to his Instagram, captioned “Dean Winchester, Hufflepuff.”

Loyal, steadfast Hufflepuff.

Castiel had believed it.

***

Doing the show dispersed the press from Dean’s home, but Missouri Moseley had turned out to be a fraud after all. She told him to be steadfast, that Castiel would come, and everything would be alright.

He didn’t. It wasn’t.

The show had aired to good ratings. Calls to Crowley for auditions and casting redoubled. Crowley begged him to take something, anything, but Dean told him to keep saying no.

He didn’t bother applying for jobs. He didn’t have time, what with everyone coming into Seattle for Sam and Jess’s wedding. He had to take people from Sea-Tac to the ferry and onto the island, driving Jessica’s mother’s Toyota Prius back and forth.

The night before the wedding, Dean lay on Sam’s battered couch and watched the lights of traffic pan across the room. Castiel wasn’t even five miles away, but he might as well be in Alaska. He gave up his pride, and look what it got him. Nothing like a lesson learned too late, huh?

Glowing red numbers on the alarm clock flicked to 4:17. He turned over, facing the back of the couch, the smell of old dust from foam cushions reminding him of the Impala, of fogged over windows and hot, deep kisses.

It hurt. But he held it in his mind, letting it take him down to sleep until the alarm blared at six. He didn’t want to get up. He didn’t want to drive to Sea-Tac.

He didn’t want to face his father.

He got up and stole the shower before Sam even slid his bedroom door open, buttoning his shirt on his way down the stairs to the car. It was a 45 minute stop and go trip to the ferry, and Dad was going to have something to say for every minute of it. At least someone from Jess’s family would be on the other side, so Dean could get back and do his best man job.

He kept feeling like he was forgetting something important, but he’d double checked his to-do list. Triple checked it.

*Castiel would know.*
Dean pushed the thought down.
Anna woke him about thirty seconds after he managed to fall asleep. Castiel waved her away, sticking his head under the pillow. “Go running without me.”

“I did. Come on. It’s 6:30, you have to move it. Bela’s meeting us at the port.”

He’d promised. Castiel dragged himself out of bed, barely dressing himself in loose climbing pants, a clean workout t-shirt, and a gray hoodie under an ultralight padded jacket. He was just as sloppy casual as most of the cruise-goers ready to disembark for a day in Anchorage.

“You look like hell,” Anna said. “Did you sleep?”

“No.”

Anna handed him a latte. It was made with over-roasted beans and scant proportions, but it was caffeine and it gave him an excuse to be taciturn. He hoped there was somewhere to get a good brew nearby. He filed out with the rest of the first class passengers, leaving the ship on strangely unsteady legs.

Bela wore a green coat, the full skirted hem blowing along with the banner of her honey blonde hair peeking out of her hood. Anna’s smile was a sunrise. She went down the gangplank on her toes, running to launch herself into Bela’s arms. Bela spun her around and set her back on her feet, kissing both cheeks.

She turned to Castiel. “How can you have such a long face after The Missouri Moseley Show, Castiel?”

“I don’t watch daytime television,” Castiel muttered into his cup.

“You haven’t seen it?” Bela asked. “You’ve got to.”

“Why?”

“Dean was on the show.”

“We know,” Anna said. “Castiel has been…unhappy ever since we found out.”

Bela blinked, cocking her head. “You need to see it,” she said. “Right now. Go to the website and watch it. There’s a decent cafe just off the pier with wifi. I’ll lend you my tablet. Come on.”

***

Dean had been prepared for a tirade. The third degree. Statements that started with phrasings like “I don’t understand your lifestyle, but...”

What he got was Dad talking about Adam’s batting average and statistics, the garden they’d made of the old back yard, and how long they’d waited for this day to come. The car handled a little harder with the weight of the elephant sitting inside it. Then finally Dad said, “That’s all our news. How you holding up, son?”

The concern in John’s voice nearly made Dean drift into the next lane. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you’ve had a rough time these last few weeks.” Dad tried to stretch his legs out, but there
wasn’t enough room in the footwell. “And then you got up there on national TV by yourself to set the record straight and I haven’t seen a hair on Castiel Novak’s head all through this. Just his brother parroting ‘No comment, no comment.’ He should at least have had the decency to say something.”

“Dad?” Who was this guy? Where was John Winchester?

“Don’t interrupt, son, I’m on a roll.”

Dean zipped a finger across his lips.

John wiped his hands on his trouser legs and went on. “It takes guts to do what you did. Just like it took guts to tell me to go soak my head every time I tried to make you what I wanted you to be. I don’t understand the details, but they don’t matter.”

“What does matter?”

“That you’re happy. If that means you…and other guys, well. Then that’s what it means.”

Something broke in Dean’s chest, warmth welling everywhere. His glasses shifted upward as he wiped at his eyes. “Dad. No chick flick moments when I’m driving.”

John laughed and squeezed his son’s shoulder. “Don’t kill us, for God’s sake. What is this music?”

“The Arctic Monkeys.”

“Don’t you have any Led Zeppelin?”

***

Dean had worn his glasses for the show. It was strange to see him in something Castiel had come to associate with privacy, intimacy. It made him look vulnerable.

Missouri had an uncanny knack for asking the questions that laid the situation bare. Dean defended Castiel every time Missouri asked him anything where Castiel could have been cast as a villain. The public might have wanted racy, salacious details, but Dean told the country the story of how he’d fallen in love with the lonely, closed off man who’d let Dean into his home, his life, and his secrets.

Castiel couldn’t have done better with Anna and a team of writers. But that wasn’t what made Castiel forget his latte, forget everything but the story unfolding in the midst of the interview.

Dean wasn’t acting. He smiled, blushed, wore his heart on his sleeve with none of the sleek, note-perfect demeanor that Dean wore when he was “on” in front of hundreds of wedding guests. He was confessing the truth.

He’d fallen in love, at last. And then the worst thing that could have happened to them leaked to the media and tore them apart. He talked about how far he fell, how he couldn’t reach Castiel, and the real reason he’d come on the show.

“This is my message in a bottle,” Dean said. “I had to tell him, somehow.”

Missouri gazed at him with warmth and compassion. “I know he’ll hear you, Dean. Tell me, what did you mean to do when your contract ended?”

“I don’t know, exactly.” Dean shrugged, but he smiled at Missouri. “I had this plan in my head,
that when it was over, I would ask him to go on a date with me.”

Cas had, too.

“That’s so sweet,” Missouri clasped Dean’s hand and squeezed. She looked at the room, past the cameras. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

A smattering of cheers rose from the audience. Dean flashed them a little smile, light sparkling off the silver frame of his spectacles.

“What would you do?”

“I’m uncreative,” Dean sat back, hands spread on the arms of the green chair he rested in. “We’d go out for dinner, and then dance in Robson Square, where we had our first date.”

Exactly what he wanted to do. Exactly. Castiel leaned closer to the screen.

Missouri fluttered one hand to rest near her heart and sighed. “Dancing’s so romantic.”

“And I’d bribe the person in charge of the music to hold a request, so our first dance would be to the song we first danced to.”

“It Had to be You,” Missouri said.

Dean hadn’t mentioned that in the interview.

“It had to be him,” Dean agreed. “I didn’t know what I was getting into when I first accepted the job. I didn’t know that any of this would happen.”

Then Missouri’s expression changed, becoming oddly vacant for a few seconds before snapping back into focus. She reached out and covered his hand. “Dean, listen to me. You think Michael leaked that contract. He didn’t. All he had was that stupid invoice. But be careful, Dean Winchester. There’s still a darkness near you, and it’s coming closer.”

That was the “psychic” part of the episode. The schtick that set Miss Moseley apart from the rest of her daytime shows - otherworldly gifts that sent her messages and guidance.

A chill crawled up Castiel’s spine, and Dean looked at her with fear and belief.

“Promise me you’ll be careful. You’ll be dancing with danger.”

“I will, Missouri. Thank you.”

Missouri brightened. “Don’t lose hope, Dean. It will all come right in the end.”

The clip ended. Anna and Bela watched him, curious. Castiel put his headphones in his pocket and handed Bela her tablet.

“I didn’t know,” he said.

Bela stuffed the tablet into her bag. “Well, now that you know, what are you going to do?”

“I’ve got to contact him.” He turned on his phone and got a roaming signal, four bars strong. He opened an SMS window for Dean’s number and texted: Saw the episode. I’m sorry. Call me.

But that wasn’t enough. “I have to go back to Seattle.”
“I thought you might say that.” Bela reached inside her green hooded coat and pulled out an envelope. “That’s the next flight back to Seattle. It’s at three, so you have time to pack. Trade you a boarding pass for it?”

He stuffed the envelope in his pocket. “The wedding’s at three.”

“Crash the reception.”

***

Adam played an acoustic guitar, notes falling like water through the speakers they rented. Every seat in the yard was taken, guests turned to watch Jessica walk over a carpet of forget-me-nots she and her bridesmaids had collected for the wedding.

She looked radiant. Her dress was simple: white, knee-length, a lace sash around her waist. Forget-me-nots crowned her hair. She held a bouquet of calla lilies in her hands, the arrangement Jess’s mother had declared cost more money than the wedge-heeled shoes Jess had chosen for a wedding on the lawn.

Sam tried to hold back tears but they rolled down his face. He covered his mouth, squeezing Dean’s hand hard enough to make Dean worry about fractures.

“It’s okay,” Dean said quietly. “It’s your wedding. You get to cry.”

Sam laughed and pulled himself together. Dean discovered why his best man list put handkerchiefs or tissues on the must-have items.

A lilac-scented breeze lifted Jess’s hair as she stopped at Sam’s side. Adam wound his song to a close. Dean patted his pocket for the eighth time, making sure he had the ring.

Sam and Jess joined hands and they may as well have been alone, they focused so completely on each other. Dean blinked away tears of his own as Sam’s voice cracked partway through his vows.

Dean had never thought that he’d get married. He never saw the point. Now he understood the madness that made people vow to be together forever, to declare it and celebrate it and live a life shared. It rested in his chest, tight and bittersweet.

They promised to share happiness and sorrow, riches and struggle, peace and trouble. To be honest and share joy and burden alike, to face the world and the future together. Dean wiped his cheeks, but the tears kept coming.

They kissed to seal the promise and turned to the attendees, presented as Mr. And Dr. Winchester. Dean couldn’t get it together. He wiped his cheeks again and shuffled over to the table, signing in the space for the witness. Sam wrapped an arm around his shoulder and squeezed.

“Don’t give up yet, Dean.”

Sam knew.

“I don’t know what else I can do.”

“Have a little faith. That’s all.”

They walked down the aisle together to Adam’s cheerful playing. Dean followed, guiding Jessica’s best friend and maid of honor down the aisle, when something made him turn his head to stare into
the bride’s side of the guests, straight into the eyes of a round faced woman with dark hair parted down the middle.

She looked familiar. Pretty. He gave her a brief smile and she smiled back, but it didn’t touch her eyes the right way.

He turned his attention to Ashley. “So how’s pediatrics?”

“As usual, a combination of adorable and heartbreaking. I’ll spare you the details, we’re at a happy occasion.” She walked her fingers up the sleeve of his tuxedo. “I hear you’re a really good dancer.”

Dean smiled. “Did you also hear that I just came off the most spectacularly bad breakup of 2015?”

She laughed and patted his arm. “Yeah, I heard that too. How are you dealing?”

“Everything’s still kind of raw.”

“Wedding’s rubbing salt in the wounds? I’ll protect you from the bachelorettes. But you owe me, Dean. I also hear you give the world’s best neckrub.”

“I’ll give you the best neckrub you can get in public with your clothes on,” Dean promised.

“Stop flirting with me, you evil man. You’re supposed to be heartbroken.” Ashley hit him on the head with her bouquet. “Come on, I’ve been smelling that barbecue beef for the whole ceremony, I’m going to die if I don’t eat something.”

***

His flight may have touched down at 6:30 but the bloody luggage handlers took nearly forty-five minutes to even start putting bags on the carousel. Castiel didn’t spot his until the awful lime green fabric case had gone around three times, and he ran out of the airport just in time to see the last taxi pull away from the curb.

“Fuck!”

“Sir?”

A liveried driver gestured toward a dark sedan, and Castiel hauled his suitcase in with him. “66 Bell Street.”

“Yes Sir.”

The ride downtown only took 20 minutes, for a miracle. Castiel burst into his suite, ditching his suitcase by the door.

“Hello, Majel.”

“Hello, Castiel. It is good to hear your voice. You have six messages.”

Castiel took the stairs two at a time. “Hold. When is the next ferry to Bainbridge Island?”

“The Puyallup will sail in an hour and twenty-two minutes.”

“That’s too late. What about Bremerton?”

“The Sealth will sail in fourteen minutes.”
“Shit.” He grabbed his emergency suit kit and ran to the bathroom. He stuffed cologne in his pocket and cursed the apathy that kept him from shaving. Too late now.

He drove to the dock and rolled onto the ferry’s deck, clambering out of his car with his suit bag hooked over his shoulder. He took the stairs two at a time, looking for a bathroom to change in.

Castiel drove off the ferry an hour and ten minutes later, sharp in shades of blue. He watched the navigation panel and followed its directions. His phone rang, and he slapped the accept button without taking his eyes off the road. “Dean?”

“Castiel,” Michael said. “How is Anchorage?”

“No clue, Michael. I’m in Bremerton, late for Dean’s brother’s wedding. Thanks to you.”

“So you saw the show.” Water splashed and lapped against the shore on Michael’s end. Michael was at home on Mercer Island, standing on his dock.

“I should never had listened to you.” Castiel followed the smooth curve of the narrow road, driving too fast. “You nearly destroyed us. Why? Why did you leak our contract?”

“I swear I didn’t. I never even saw it until TMZ emailed me a PDF.”

“If you didn’t send it, and Dean didn’t send it—”

Michael hesitated. “I just assumed Dean sent it.”

Castiel eased off the accelerator, but he gripped the steering wheel tight. “You accused him without proof?”

“It made sense at the time.”

Michael didn’t apologize. He explained his justifications. Castiel pounced. “Does that mean it doesn’t make sense now?”

“Dean got on national TV, defended you, and declared his love. It could be a move in a greater game—”

“Michael.”

“But maybe it isn’t,” Michael relented. “He wouldn’t take any of those roles. He told me he’d wash dishes before he sold his soul to me, and he went and did that. Why would he?”

“So you were wrong?”

“It appears that I may have been in error.”

“Wow. Just—all this time, I could have been—you may have been in error. Fuck’s sake. What are you doing to find out who leaked that contract?”

Sam knew about the deal, but he would never do that to his brother. Ezekiel knew, but he never saw the actual details.

“I could ask around.”

“Never reveal a source, etc. Wait. Did everyone who emailed you attach the file as a new email or did any of them—”
“Forward it? Let me look.”

Castiel had to turn right along one of these lanes. He glanced at his map and slowed down.

“I’ve got it,” Michael said. “Somebody forwarded. The sender is castielslady at mail dot com.”

“You never checked?” Castiel’s ears were ringing. “God damn you, Michael. Anna was right to cut you off.”

“Castiel, I'm sorry.”

“Now you're sorry?”

“Yes. I made a mistake.”

“I can't talk to you right now. Goodbye.”

Castiel hung up on his brother and drove faster.

The phone rang again, and Castiel slapped the answer button. “Michael, I mean it. Go away and let me think.”

Inias's voice came through the speakers. “Castiel, it's Inias.”

Castiel sighed and let his shoulders fall. “Sorry. I thought you were my brother.”

“It’s all right. Do you know where Dean is?”

“Bainbridge Island, at his brother’s wedding. Why?”

“Margaret Masters rented a car this morning.”

Castiel’s stomach turned to ice. “She what? Where did she go?”

“We don’t know.”

“But we had surveillance!”

“The contractor followed her until she left the city limits, and then decided to turn around, go back to the office, and email a bill rather than follow her.”

“Was she headed north?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“This morning. She could easily be in Vancouver right now.”

“Or Bainbridge.” She didn't know where Dean was. Did she? Castiel drifted around a bend in the road, pushing the Tesla faster, faster. She sent the contract. A virus in an email? A keylogger or a trojan? That’s how Castiel would do it.

“Assume she went to Sam's wedding. The address is--”

The call disconnected. He was too far out to get signal.
“Fuck.” Did he U-turn back to get Inias again, or keep going?

Inias could find the address. Castiel didn't have a moment to waste. He had to find Dean.
Dean stuck by Ashley through the reception. They joined the buffet line together, danced to the electro-swing song chosen for the bridal party dance, and swilled craft beer in red Solo cups at their picnic table.

“So seriously,” Ashley asked, midway through their second beer. “Is Missouri Moseley really psychic?”

“She knew things I never told her,” Dean said. “Some of them were things I don’t think she could have found out, but you don’t know, right? But she said it would all work out.”

Ashley leaned on his arm. “Maybe it will.”

“I don’t know what I was expecting.” Dean looked into his beer cup as if wisdom were served with brown ale. “I guess I thought he’d call me. Send me a text. Something. I’ve been ghosted.”

“Maybe there’s one sitting on your phone right now.”

“Phone’s off,” Dean said. “There’s no signal out here anyway.”

Ashley studied the beer in her cup. “Yeah, there’s that.”

The crowd parted around the dark haired woman Dean had seen just after the ceremony. She watched the dancers, an amused curve to her lips. Where had she seen her before?

“What are you staring at?” Ashley looked over her shoulder, and then looked back at him quizzically. “Meg? Really? Do you have a knack for picking the weird chicks?”

The name jolted him to full alert. “Meg?”

“She was in our dorm. Scientist. Mad Scientist, more like. She had a thing for Orlando Bloom when we were in school, but if a guy talked to her she’d run away. Weird, right?”

“Meg,” Dean repeated. “What’s her last name?”

“Masters.”

She turned and looked him in the eye, tossed her hair over one shoulder. She smiled at him, joy on her lips, malice in her eyes. *It’s her. She’s here. How—*

Ashley downed the last of her beer, and plucked his empty cup out of his hand. “My turn to get refills.”

She was gone before Dean could protest. But what could he say? *Don’t leave me alone, that tiny woman over there will get me?* She was bird-boned and pale, her shiny lilac dress full skirted like the petals of a flower. Fragile and delicate, but she made Dean want to run and find somewhere to hide.

Sam. He had to find Sam.

A shadow fell across his lap. Meg peeked at him over the curled petals of an orange lily in her hand, almost coquettish. She breathed in its scent and smiled at him with pearly white, pretty teeth.
“Dean Winchester,” She said. “I’ve been wanting to meet you for weeks.”

How did he play this? She knew he recognized her. She relished it. How would she want him to respond?

Humiliated. “Meg.” He bowed his head, showed his palms. “You were right.”

Triumph shone in her eyes. “Yes. I was.” She dragged the lily’s petals over her cheek, tilting her head as the music changed to a slow tune with the smooth brass sounds of a big band.

A foxtrot.

Meg put out her hand. “Dance with me, Dean. I hear you’re an excellent dancer.”

Did he have a choice? “We could sit here and talk.” Where was Sam? He scanned the crowd, but his sasquatch of a brother wasn’t anywhere.

Meg tugged on his hand. “I want you to dance with me, Dean. And then we’ll walk in the moonlight. Doesn’t that sound nice? We have so much to talk about.”

Dean led her to the lantern lit square. He had to keep her calm. He had to play along. Where the hell did Sam go?

***

Signs lined the road to Jess’s parents’ house that read, “Jess and Sam parking ahead.” A sign directed him into a driveway, where dozens of cars parked along rows marked out by rickety stakes and bright traffic tape.

He could hear the party long before he reached the house. He followed the music to a backyard lit by strings of tiny lights and paper lanterns. One section of the lawn was cleared for dancers, and long picnic tables held paper plates and red plastic cups. Sam stood on the deck to the back of the house, a bowl of potato chips in his hand.

“Sam. Where’s Dean?”

He descended the stairs unsmiling, staring hard at Castiel’s unshaven face. He stopped within arm’s reach, and Castiel braced himself.

“You’re late.”

“I was in Anchorage. I need to find Dean, it's important.”

Sam passed the bowl of chips to a woman in a flowered chiffon dress. “Why did you go to Anchorage?”

“I promise I'll tell you everything, but I have to find Dean right now.”

“It can wait,” Sam said. “Why didn’t you call him?”

“Is a woman named Margaret Masters here?”

“Meg? Yeah. She was the late RSVP, when we all went to get burgers.” Sam frowned. “Cas, what’s going on?”

“Margaret Masters is castielslady, Sam.”
Sam’s brows knit in confusion. “Who?”

Dean hadn’t told him. “She’s a stalker. She thinks I’m in love with her. She hates Dean because I dated him, and she’s here.”

Sam’s jaw hung open. “And you -- Fuck. We have to find him. Ashley!”

He dashed over to a doll-faced redhead in a periwinkle bridesmaid’s dress. “Have you seen Dean?”

“Oh my God. You came for him.” Ashley got to her feet. “Dean’s, um, he’s—”

She glanced toward the trees.

“He’s on the trails?”

“He thought you broke up with him,” Ashley said. “After you didn’t call, after he told the whole world he loved you.”

Sam grabbed her shoulders. “Was he with Meg?”

“They were dancing together,” Ashley said. “And then they--”

He reached for his phone. No signal. “Go in the house and call the police. I'm going to find them.”

Sam reached for Castiel’s arm. “Cas, wait--”

Castiel took off running, headed for the break in the trees. A flash of orange lay just off the trail. A lily.

An orange lily.

Cold trickled into Castiel’s middle.

He moved faster.

***

“You tried to take him from me,” Meg said.

“You were right.” Dean licked his lips. He held his hands out, and he looked at Meg in the face. At her face, and not at the snub nosed revolver she held in her hands. “We did it for the PR. I wasn't supposed to love him. And he doesn't love me back. You were right.”

She didn’t know how to use that gun. She held it in front of her as if it were a bouquet of flowers, wrists and elbows bent. He could take it, if something distracted her.

“You shouldn’t have lied on television. You shouldn’t have lied.”

“You’re right. It was wrong. I should go back and tell them I lied.” Dean didn’t know if he was doing the right thing by playing along, but he wasn’t going to argue with Smith and Wesson.

“He loves me.” She jabbed the gun at him. “He tells me all the time. It’s written in his smile. He says it with his hands. But you held his hands, so he couldn’t tell me. You tried to take his smiles.”

“I was wrong. I’ll tell everyone I was wrong.”

“That you’re sorry,”
“I am,” Dean said. “I’ll tell them all. We can go back, and I’ll tell everyone.”

Movement, out of the corner of Dean’s eye.

“Meg?” Castiel stepped into the clearing, cell phone blazing like a flashlight. “Meg, darling, what are you doing? Why aren’t you at the party?”

Joy spread over Meg’s face. “Castiel. My love.”

Dean waited for her to turn, to drop her guard, but she stayed focused on Dean.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” Castiel came closer. “We’re supposed to have our first dance.”

“He has to pay for what he’s done.”

Castiel slipped a gentle hand down her arm. Meg shuddered. “Come with me, Meg. Put down the gun. Can’t you hear the music?”

If she dropped her guard, Dean could take her. Nobody had to get hurt.

“He tried to destroy us.”

“He was just doing his job. That’s all.” Castiel circled around, standing between Dean and the muzzle of Meg’s gun.

*No. No.* Nausea rolled around in Dean’s middle.

“Forget about him. I’m here now.”

“Don’t protect him. He doesn’t deserve it!”

“Wasn’t this what we always wanted?” Castiel asked. “Isn’t this what we planned for, in all those dreams? You don’t have to hurt him.”

*Get the fuck out of the way, Cas.*

“Why are you protecting him?” Meg demanded. “He tried to take you from me! Do you love him? Is that it?”

“I came for you,” Castiel said.

Meg raised the gun again. “He took you away from me. You love him. That’s why the dreams ended, that’s why.”

Dean dared a step to the left. Slow. So slow. Meg only had eyes for Cas. He took another.

Castiel held his hands out. “We don’t need the dreams any more.”

“The dreams are everything!” Meg screamed.

Light swept through the trees. footsteps broke branches. Meg swung the gun back, pointing it at Castiel.

Sam broke into the clearing.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Tears streamed down Meg’s face, smeared black lines. She glared at Castiel. “He took you away from me.”

“I don’t need help!” The gun shook in Meg’s hands.

“Meg. You can end this,” Castiel said. “You don’t have to hurt anymore.”

Meg stared at him. “You want me to end this?”

“You don’t have to hurt anyone.”

Meg drew her elbows back and stuffed the barrel under her chin. “You don’t love me.”

Oh no. “Meg, don’t do this,” Dean said.

“Shut up. You destroyed us.” Meg’s eyes glittered with tears and hate. “What do I have now?”

Shadows moved behind her. Dean kept his eyes on Meg’s face. “You can get better. You can love someone for real. You can have more than just dreams.”

“The dreams are safe.”

Dean pitched his voice low, soft. “Love’s not safe, Meg. Loving someone else sets you up to get hurt bad.”

“They always hurt you,” Meg said. “The dreams are beautiful.”

Dean treated Sam like he was a camera. He didn’t look. He was close enough to grab Meg, if that gun wasn’t stuffed in the soft flesh behind her chin.

“You can’t dream when you’re dead, Meg. Put down the gun, and dream again.”

“It hurts.”

“I know,” Dean said.

“Did it hurt, when he left you?”

“Yes.”

“Did it make you want to die?”

“I’ll tell you, if you put down the gun.”

Meg faltered. “I want to die.”

“I know,” Dean said. “It hurts.”

Meg’s eyes went hard. “It’s your fault.” The tip of the barrel slid out from under her chin.

Castiel shoved Dean out of the way. “No!”

The shot made the air pop.

Sam seized Meg. The gun tumbled to the grass. Meg shrieked in rage, but Sam wrestled her to the ground and put a knee in her back.
Castiel had pushed him out of the way. Cas. Was he hit? Dean scrambled to reach him. Cas stood up from his defensive crouch, one hand cupped around his shoulder.

Meg fought Sam with screams and flailing limbs, groping for the revolver lying inches from her scrabbling fingers. Dean dragged the gun out of Meg’s reach.

“Cas!”

Castiel stood up, wincing. “I’m fine.”

“You’ve been shot.”

He shook his head. “Landed wrong. Are you hurt? Sam?”

“I’ve got her.” One of the guests rushed to help Sam hold onto Meg, but all the fight went out of her. She stared at Dean, her eyes haunted.

“You should have let me die.”

Sirens wailed in the distance.

***

Jess and her bridesmaids hustled Castiel into the kitchen of the Moore house, shouting at each other as other guests babbled in dismay. They sat him in a chair and eased him out of his jacket and shirt, shone lights in his eyes, pinched his finger with a device meant to read his oxygen levels.

“Are you all doctors?” he asked.

“I’m Pediatrics. Jess is Cardiothoracic, Emma is orthopedic, Rachelle is a general surgeon,” Ashley said. “Do you feel cold?”

“I’m fine.”

“Anybody have a sling laying around?”

“I do,” one of the doctors said. Emma, Castiel thought, with the raven hair and the strong jaw. “I’ll be back.”

“Stare at the wall,” Ashley said. “Tell me when you see my finger.”

Castiel stared at the green gingham curtains and the cheerful round clock with a rooster painted on its face. “Now.”

“Good. Follow my finger, only with your eyes.” Ashley moved her finger in a slow pattern. “Any pain, besides the shoulder?”

“None,” Castiel said. “Thank you for checking on me.”

Ashley passed her examination light to Jess, who shoved Dean into a chair. Forget-me-nots hung from her hair, scattered among loose curls at random. She raised the light to Dean’s eye, making the pupil constrict.

Dean tried to push Jess away, blinking away spots in his eyes. “I’m okay. Jess. Stop doctoring me.”

“Shut up.” Jess shone the light into his other eye. “Pupils are responsive. When you fell, did you hit
your head?”

Dean sighed. “No.”

God, but he was beautiful. Not a scratch on him, but they had come so close. Castiel’s ears still rang from the shot, still shuddered when the memory of that bullet whizzing right next to Dean’s head.

Castiel could have lost him. They all could have lost him. Dean could sit there and let his sister in law make sure he was okay.

Jess ran her fingers over Dean’s scalp. “Does that feel tender?”

Dean tried squirming away from her hands. “Isn’t it unethical for you to treat family members?”

Castiel squeezed his hand. “She’s worried, Dean. Let her.”

“I’m fine,” Dean insisted. “She didn’t hurt me. I’m sorry I ruined your wedding.”

Jess laughed and the sound came out a little too high. “She could have shot you. You could have died.”

“I’m okay,” Dean said.

“Why didn’t you tell us about Meg?” Jess demanded.

“I’d like to know that.” Sam stepped into the kitchen. “You knew she was stalking you.”

Dean looked away. “I didn’t know it was her. It was just email. I never thought…”

“I could have gotten you a restraining order.”

“Castiel’s security consultant advised against it.”

“Inias?” Sam asked. “He’s outside with a bunch of guys in suits.”

Castiel cleared his throat. “That would probably be his team.”

Sam gave Castiel an accusing stare. “So you both knew about this. And you didn’t tell me.”

Dean’s shoulders went up. “I knew what you’d say.”

“What? That you should stop this? Damn right I would. You were almost killed, Dean. She showed up here to kill you.”

“You would have wanted me to quit,” Dean said. “I didn’t want to quit.”

Sam shot a hot look at Castiel. “You let him risk his life.”

“I offered to dissolve the contract. I probably should have insisted.” Castiel looked down at the yellow linoleum tiles. “I was selfish.”

“Damn right you were,” Sam said.

Dean folded his arms. “Dude, what the hell, like you’re my dad?”

Sam thumped the butcher-block counter with a fist. “You could have died!”
“I’m fine! It was just email.”

Sam pointed out the kitchen window. “What happened out there was not just email.”

“Would you have left, if it meant leaving Jess?”

Sam shook his head. “Never.”

“What if you’d only been together a month?”

Sam thought. “No. I wouldn’t have.”

“So why do you think I would?”

Sam stared at Dean. “That’s not the point.”

“It is for me. And I’m not fighting with you over it, so give it up.”

“Do you have any idea what we’d be going through if you died?”

“Sam.” Dean got to his feet. “Stop. I’m alive. I twisted my ankle. That’s it.”

“You’re minimizing,” Sam said. “You need to talk to somebody.”

“Chuck has a bachelor’s in psychology. I’ll buy him some beer.”

Sam dragged his hands through his hair. “Can’t you take this seriously?”

“No,” Dean said. “Because if I do, I’m going to puke. Okay? Now give me a hug and--” Dean grunted. “Sam, you’re squishing me.”

“Shut up.” Sam let him go. “You need to see everyone and tell them you’re okay. No fading out.”

“Okay.” Dean looked back at Castiel, but closed his mouth on whatever he was going to say and went outside.

Sam turned a hard stare on him. “You figured a stalker was no big deal, Castiel?”

“Sam, I’m sorry. Dean worried you would want him to stop.”

“And you?”

Castiel looked down at the floor. “I was selfish. I didn’t want it to stop either.”

“Sam,” Jess touched his shoulder. “They’re okay. They’re both okay. Meg’s in custody. It’s over.”

Sam and looked at Jess, and his shoulders sank with a long sigh. “Make him go to therapy.” Sam said.

“I will.”

“Back me up when I push for it.”

“I will,” Castiel promised. “I’m sorry. I know that doesn’t help, but--”

“It will,” Sam said. “Just let me be mad right now.”
“I’m going to find Dean.”

Ashley pushed him back into the chair. “Not so fast. We’re not done.”

“You’re going to put your arm in a sling. And you are going to rest it for a couple of days,” Jess said. “And then you’re going to follow up with Emma at Harborview if it still hurts on Monday for x-rays and ultrasound.”

Castiel let them help him do his buttons and fit the sling before they let him go outside.

It wasn’t hard to find Dean. He hugged his way across the lawn, wiping tears and repeating that he was okay as he went from his aunt Ellen to his step-mother Kate and his half-brother Adam and hooked one arm around a big man who was a darker, heavier featured version of Sam and Dean put together. He shot a look at Castiel, staring him down as Dean patted the back of a sandy-haired man in a decades old suit.

Castiel lifted his chin and stopped just inside the man’s reach. “I’m Castiel Novak.”

“I know who you are,” he said. “John Winchester.”

“How do you do?”

“My son nearly died tonight, that’s how I do.” John glanced at his son’s back. Dean held his cousin Jo, rocking her from side to side. “Look at him. He nearly died, and he’s taking care of everyone else.”

“He does that,” Castiel said. “He puts other people first.”

“He learned it from me,” John said. “I put too much on that boy. And then I threw him out of the house for something that should have been nothing and he forgave me. And now look at him, holding everybody else up.”

“He needs somebody to take care of him.”

John scowled. “So what are you doing, standing here talking to me?”

***

Dean was hugging a guest he didn’t even know when Castiel came close, wearing a nylon sling on his left arm. He was okay. Dean’s insides un-knotted and kinked up again. Castiel was here. But where had he been?

“You’re okay?”

“I’m supposed to take it easy for a couple of days and see Emma at the hospital on Monday.”

“Does it hurt?”

“I’m going to be sore in the morning,” Castiel said. “Do you want to go for a walk? I left Sam and Jess’s wedding present in the car.”

Dean’s eyebrows pushed up. “I could use some fresh air.” And an explanation.

Castiel offered his hand but Dean passed him, heading up the paved driveway and across two unlit lanes to walk on the left side.
Castiel caught up, footsteps crunching on the unpaved shoulder. Dean put himself on the left, next to his bound arm. “You’re up at the Parker field, right? With all the signs?”

“Yes. Dean, I--”

“The Parkers are nice. I hope their land’s not too torn up.”

“Dean I’m sorry.”

“For being late to the wedding? Don’t worry. I didn’t expect you to show up at all--”

“I was in Anchorage this morning.”

Dean halted. “Alaska.”

Castiel turned back. “I didn’t see the show until this morning. I was on a cruise ship, and they don’t have internet at sea.”

Alaska. Dean’s stomach sank. He ran away. “I don’t remember “Cruise to Alaska” on your schedule.”

“Michael thought I should get away from the press--”

“Well, that’s one way to do it.” Dean cut back across the pebbly asphalt road into the driveway where dozens of cars waited for their owners to return. The Tesla chirped in response to Castiel’s gesture, and Castiel retrieved a pair of small boxes from the passenger seat.

Dean held out his hand. “Wristwatches?”

“His and hers.”

“Nice gift.” Dean took one and stepped back. “So that’s why you came?”

“I wanted to find you.”

“You did.”

“I was going to ask you to forgive me.”

“Insightful of you.”

“Dean, please forgive me. I should have called you. I should have told you what I was trying to do, but I was too busy trying to prove Michael wrong.”

“That happen a lot?”

Castiel sighed. “Ever since we were little.”

“Did you prove him wrong a lot?”

“Not that he would admit to. Michael doesn’t like to be wrong.”

“I guessed that.”

“He told me he was wrong, Dean.”

He’d been defending him from his brother. “So. You won.”
“You’re angry at me. You have a right to be.”

“I thought you weren’t coming back.”

“It was stupid of me. I got so caught up in making Michael see the truth.”

“And you wanted to fix things before you called me,” Dean turned the gift over in his hands. “You put yourself between me and a bullet.”

“You can be angry about that all you want. I probably scared you to death.”

The moment that gun went off was the worst moment of his life. Castiel on the ground, and Dean didn’t hurt--

He took Cas into his arms, minding his shoulder, and held him like he’d break. “Never do that again.”

“No.” Castiel’s right arm wound around Dean’s waist. “I’ll do it every time. Protect you, take care of you, love you. Dean. I love you.”

Dean shut his mouth and tightened his hold.

Castiel loved him too.

Dean kissed his cheek. Castiel turned his head and kissed Dean, a string of kisses across his mouth.

Dean smiled into his kisses, drew back a little. “Did you just figure that out now?”

“I knew for sure in Banff. But it’s been true for a while. Hasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Castiel touched Dean’s face, letting his fingers drift along fine cheekbones, tracing a path over his freckles. “Come home with me.”

“I can’t. I’m on pancake duty for the breakfast.”

“Can I stay with you?”

“I’m sleeping in a tent.”

“Okay.”

Dean narrowed his eyes at Castiel. “Have you ever slept in a tent?”

“No.”

“You shouldn’t. Your shoulder will seize right up.”

“The earliest ferry back is at six in the morning,” Castiel said. “Come home with me.”

***

They arrived to the ferry just in time and rode up to the observation deck. Cas in his sling and Dean in his tux attracted curious looks, but they sat next to each other in molded seats, holding hands. Castiel would lift them to his mouth and kiss Dean’s knuckles, one after another.
The Tesla’s silence was still unnerving but she handled like she knew what her driver was thinking. Dean parked her in Castiel’s spot, and they rode the elevator hand in hand up to the third floor.

“There’s something you need to see,” Castiel said. “It was going to be a surprise for when we came back--”

“It’s a surprise now,” Dean said. “Is it bigger than a breadbox?”

“Yes.” Castiel pushed away from the wall. “It’s definitely bigger than a breadbox. After you.”

Dean led the way down the hall, startling when his phone vibrated in his breast pocket when he was close to the door. It opened to his touch.

“Please identify yourself.”

“Majel?” Dean asked.

“Hello, Dean. It is good to hear your voice. You have four messages. Shall I play them now?”

Dean blinked his vision clear. “You never revoked my access.”

“You were coming back.”

“But even after you thought I leaked the contract--”

Castiel toed out of his shoes. “That would have been logical, but I couldn’t believe you did it. And I was right.”

“Did Michael--”

“No. Meg hacked you. She sent the contract.”

“Meg. I know when. I was on the bus. I was answering emails, and one of them was actually from her. Led to a website. She gave me a trojan.”

“I’ll prove it later,” Castiel said. “Come and see your surprise.”

Castiel crossed the floor of his sitting room, climbing up the pair of stairs to the empty room. Dean followed, leaving his shoes behind. “If it’s bigger than a breadbox, is it a charcoal barbecue grill?”

“Good guess, but no.”

“Is it a--”

Words died.

The table shone in the moonlight, taking up the west half of the room with its length. Dean took a step closer, another.

A wide, irregular slab of wood made even with clear resin, as if the wood inside were caught in amber. The surface caught the light like glass. It was longer than Dean was tall, long enough to seat ten, a dozen.

He touched it, smooth and gleaming under his fingers.

Somersaults. Butterflies. Fireworks. And warmth, like the air that kissed your face when you
opened the door to your home after a chilly time outside.

“Cas.”

“I bought it before we left for Banff. I paid Susan to be here to take delivery.”

A perfect circle of wetness landed on the surface.

“One knockout piece, and then figure out the rest.” Castiel moved closer. “I wanted to ask you what else we should get--”

Dean shut him up with a kiss, another. “You bought a table.”

“I bought a table.”

“You empty room isn’t empty anymore.”

“I want you to help me fill it.” Castiel kissed him, gentle feathered lips on his cheeks, kissing the tears away.

“We need chairs.”

Castiel laughed and kissed Dean’s cheek. “I asked you before, but it was a bad time.”

Dean couldn’t breathe. Castiel put his good hand in Dean’s and the world spun as Castiel sank down to rest on one knee.

“I love you, Dean Winchester. I want you to be my family. Will you marry me?”
Dean was only getting married once in his whole life, and he was not going to let Seattle traffic win.

He and Sam had dressed in the hotel room Dean insisted on booking for Sam and Jess, and they fought their way down Fourth Street in his crepe paper festooned Impala, hitting every single red light on the way. The parking garage attendant looked doubtfully at the car, and told them that they’d probably need two spaces to accommodate Baby’s seventeen feet and nine inches, and that meant purchasing two tickets.

They had to comb the entire garage to find a place and then run like hell up to Union Station. Pedestrians slid aside as Sam and Dean dashed through the crowd in gray morning suits, Sam yelling “Coming through! Late for the wedding, excuse me!”

They slowed down a few steps before the Great Hall. Sam silenced the beeping alarm on his phone and they waved at a relieved Michael, who turned and signaled to his brother Lucas.

“What happened?”

“Photographers,” Dean muttered. “They ambushed us in the parking lot.”

Michael straightened his tulip boutonniere. “Well you’re here now.”

The music stopped. Conversation among the guests hushed.

“Ready?” Sam asked.

“Ready.”

Michael patted Dean’s shoulder. “Go get him.”

Dean paused at the edge of the audience, Sam standing by his side. He looked up, and Castiel waited for him at the other side.

Dean’s heart leapt.

Sam patted Dean’s shoulder. “If you start walking now? You get to keep him.”

Dean took a step. Another. On the other side of the circle, Castiel walked to meet him.

They didn’t want one person or the other walking down the aisle as if one were to be given to the other. It had been Jess’s idea, sketched on a napkin from the hospital cafeteria to arrange the seats in two halves of a circle with the aisle meeting in the center.

The music soared to the barrel vaulted ceiling high above them, chords and melody carrying Dean closer to Castiel, handsome in dove gray and a wide silk tie, the exact same color as his eyes.

He was going to lose it. He welled over with the moment, surrounded by their family and friends. Dean blinked to keep his vision clear, listening to Joel read the first words of their ceremony:
“Sometimes two people meet and nothing goes the way they’d predict. Their careful plans crumble as they catch sight of each other, drawn together in spite of a hundred reasons not to get close. The moment they meet becomes a story begun that takes the rest of their lives to tell.”

Somebody sniffled. Dean knew that feeling.

“Join us now in celebrating this chapter of the story of Dean and Castiel,” Joel said. “Family, friends, do you offer your support and your wisdom as they journey together through life as husbands?”

The answer echoed through the room: “We do.”

“Castiel has a few words to say.”

Castiel’s hands were warm and soft. “For a long time, I thought this would never happen to me. That I’d just go on alone. That it was all I had. And I was wrong. When I came up with my great idea to fool my family, I thought I was so clever, that I’d found the best way to go on with my life the way it was meant to be.” He shrugged, like he was conceding a point. “And I was wrong.”

The audience chuckled. Castiel let them, and went on.

“But I was right. I had found the best way to go on. With you. And everyone figured it out before I did.”

Laughter again, and Dean joined in. Castiel’s eyes were soft, his smile brilliant.

“You’re in me, Dean Winchester. You fit. You’re welcoming, and kind, and thoughtful. You’re talented, and beautiful, and you’re in my heart. I look at you and think how lucky I am that I met you, and I had the sense to fall in love.”

Castiel raised Dean’s hands and kissed them. “This is where I belong.”

Dean couldn’t kiss him yet. Not until after their vows. But his heart beat huge in his chest, and joy surrounded him, filled him up. He grinned back at Castiel’s wrinkled nose and wide mouth, and everything was perfect.

Then Joel spoke into the quiet. “Dean has a few words to say.”

His mind was blank as a fresh sheet of paper.

Castiel blinked back tears, but his smile was bright as the morning, and Dean had forgotten his lines. He’d written them out, re-copying them twice. He rehearsed every chance he got. Sam could probably recite them.

He forgot. Oh, God. He had to do something fast, before people caught on.

He held Castiel’s hands and said the first thing that came to him.

“I fell in love with you just now.”

Castiel cocked his head. Dean smiled, wanting to kiss him right then.

“You took my hands, and you blinked back tears and I fell in love with you. I keep doing it. I fell in love with you yesterday too, when you kissed me goodbye before I went to the hotel to get ready to marry you today. I fell in love with you the day before that, and the day before that, all the way back to the very first time I looked at you and thought, wow. He’s amazing. To that moment when
I knew that you held my heart in your hands, and all I could do was let you have it. I fell in love with you. I’ll do it again in an hour. In a day. When we give each other paper, and wood, and silver, and gold, I’ll fall in love with you. Over and over again.”

Castiel pressed his lips together and smiled, tears running down his cheeks.

“Fall in love with me too, Cas.” Dean squeezed his hands. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed it.

I'm ceeainthereforthat on tumblr, too.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!