Though The Course May Change

by imogenbynight

Summary

After a couple who went missing several years ago from an Oregon couples retreat are mysteriously returned on the same night that another disappears, Dean and Charlie plan to go undercover to find the cause--until Dean's foot meets his mouth, and he finds himself fake-engaged to Castiel instead.

Notes

This fic takes place in an alternate canon universe. In this version of events, Sam successfully closed the gates of Hell in 8.23 and then recovered on his own. There was no Ezekiel/Gadreel fiasco. Cas went directly to the bunker after he fell, and he stayed there.

Hemlock Lake, Sunstone Island, and Ancora Resort are all fictional. Umpqua National Forest is not. For the sake of this fic, I basically dug a new lake into the middle of Oregon and dropped an island in it. This must be what God feels like. Blasphemy? Blasphem-you.

Please go look at jigglykat's wonderful art here on tumblr!

There are a lot of OCs in this fic. I like to choose actors/celebrities to play each character as it helps me visualize them while writing, so if you're into that kind of thing, click here to see a photo grid.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue

A shoe is the first thing to wash up on the pebbled beach of Sunstone Island; a red patent leather pump, scratched and ruined and tangled in lake weed.

Andre Freeman doesn’t notice it as he makes his way along the water’s edge. He’s preoccupied. In his pocket, he closes his hand around a maroon velvet-covered box, worrying the metal closure with his thumb. He’s already been gone far too long. Lauren is probably getting worried, but the question he’s been planning to ask her weighs on him, heavier by far than the ring in his pocket.

A sudden bout of nerves sent Andre outside for a cigarette before their appetizers even arrived. Once he stepped through the door, though, he found himself unable to light it.

He’s mostly quit, thanks to actually sticking to his New Year’s resolution for once. Besides that, Lauren hates the smell. He knows that if she says yes--and damn, does he hope she will--she’ll want to kiss him. The last thing he wants is to ruin the moment because he tastes like an ashtray.

“You can do this,” he tells himself, rubbing the velvet box as he takes another fortifying breath. Still, it’s not until he feels the first drops of summer rain that he starts to walk back the way he’d come.

The shoe completely escapes his notice. He trips over it and goes sprawling with an undignified yelp, ring box still clasped tightly in his hand.

He hears Lauren laughing at him before he sees her, and looks up from where he’s landed on his hands and knees in wet, pebble-strewn sand. The sight of her there, her eyes warm in the fading light of dusk as she walks toward him, sets his stomach flipping all over again. It’s as good a time as any, he thinks.

Almost as soon as he pushes himself up into a more respectable kneel, and Lauren’s mouth falls open in understanding, the rain grows heavier.

“So, this isn’t exactly how I wanted to do this,” he starts, squinting through the sudden downpour, but before he can get to the part he’s been planning Lauren’s gaze shifts from him to something behind him in the water.
“Andre--” she says, a strange, uncharacteristic quiver in her voice, and he twists to see what she’s looking at.

Emerging from the lake is a woman, broad shouldered and doe-eyed, and despite having apparently just emerged from the lake and into a rainstorm she looks completely dry. Her hair floats around her in berry-red wisps, and some strange trick of the light makes it seem as though she’s surrounded by dancing flame.

She’s beautiful in a terrifying kind of way. She looks at the two of them like she’s found something precious.

When she stretches out her hands, the water parts around her to reveal bare legs that glisten with silvery scales like the belly of a fish, and Andre can’t help but push to his feet. Lauren’s hand slips into his. Her skin is hot beneath the cool mist of rain.

A little further along the beach, a couple drag themselves onto the pebble-strewn sand, dazed and confused. Andre and Lauren pay them no mind.

Hand in hand, they follow the woman down into shifting water.
LOST AND FOUND AT OREGON COUPLES RETREAT

SUNSTONE ISLAND, OREGON — It was a night of mixed emotions this Saturday at Ancora Couples Retreat, when Teresa and Isaac Ortega—newlyweds whose disappearance from the resort while on their honeymoon in July of 2009 sparked a month-long search of the surrounding Hemlock Lake and Umpqua National Forest—were found alive and well during an unrelated search for Phoenix couple Andre Freeman and Lauren Pratt, who went missing earlier that evening.

According to multiple witnesses, Freeman, 29, excused himself from the island’s only restaurant to have a cigarette around 7pm, leaving Pratt, 27, in the company of another couple until she became worried by his failure to return half an hour later.

After assuring the other guests—who wished to remain unnamed—that she would be back shortly, Pratt left the restaurant. She was not seen again.

Despite a thorough search of the island and surrounding lake, police found no evidence of foul play, and on inspection of the couple’s cabin all of their belongings were found untouched.

“The staff and guests at Ancora have been very forthcoming, however we have not yet found any conclusive evidence of what happened to Ms. Pratt or Mr. Freeman,” a police spokesperson said. “We urge anyone with information to come forward.”

MR AND MRS ORTEGA, while suffering no physical injuries, are now under observation at Oregon State Hospital in Salem. It is unclear at this stage where they have been held for the past four years, as they have been unable to provide police with a description of their assailant(s).

In the face of these disturbing events, management at Ancora insist that their resort is a safe and welcoming place.

When asked if the resort would remain in operation, manager Judith Montague stated that Ancora would continue to provide a nurturing environment for couples in need of a little rest and relaxation.

“The safety and happiness of our guests is of utmost importance,” Ms Montague stressed, before adding that resort security would be... [cont. p24]
out a laugh.

“So?” she prompts him when he doesn’t say anything else, leaning so far forward that she’s in danger of wearing her breakfast. “It’s probably a case, right?”

“Could be,” Dean says.

Beside him, Sam nods as he flips to page twenty-four.

“So,” Charlie repeats, waving her hands at Dean like she wants him to complete the thought for her. When he doesn’t--he can see exactly what she’s angling for and thinks he’d prefer to sit through a Starship concert than let her anywhere near anything riskier than a salt & burn--she waves her hands in an exaggerated gesture of impatience. “Let’s get on it.”

“Charlie--”

At his tone, her eyes narrow.

“Look,” she says, cutting him off and pointing her overloaded fork at him. A chunk of syrupy waffle slides off and hits her plate with a wet splat. “Here’s the deal. I didn’t call you guys here for your permission. I called for your help. This is my case. I’m working it with you or without, but with would be a whole lot easier.”

Dean looks at her, watching the way she squares her shoulders and lifts her chin. There’s a dab of whipped cream on her lip. It drastically undermines the air of authority she’s going for.

“Hunting is dangerous, Charlie,” he tells her, gesturing for her to wipe her face. She ignores him on both counts.

“You don’t say,” she says, voice flat. “But in case you forgot, I already took out a vampire on my own.”

“A scrawny, teen-aged vampire,” Sam interjects, finally putting down the paper, and she turns her narrowed eyes on him. He points at his own upper lip. “You’ve got a little--”

Rolling her eyes, she finally wipes her face with her napkin and tosses it onto the table.

“I still kicked his undead butt. C’mon, guys. Are you gonna help me or not?”

They’re both silent for a long moment, and when Dean glances over at him, Sam shrugs.

“There’s definitely something going on,” he says to Dean. “Both couples went missing without a trace around the same time of year, for one thing. That could be a coincidence. But the first couple turning up on the same night the second disappeared?”

Sam doesn’t bother to say that it’s a little too coincidental to be nothing, but Dean gets the message anyway. He sighs, rubbing his eyes.

“Yeah, I know,” he says. Glancing back at Charlie, he drops his hands to the table. “You’re not gonna listen to reason, are you?”

“Nope,” she says.

Dean sighs.

“Then what’s your plan?”
She grins.

“I’m glad you asked, because I happen to have a fantastic plan.”

Dean can’t help but laugh. Charlie might lack experience but she more than makes up for it in enthusiasm. He just hopes this hunt will go more smoothly than the last one they worked together—that whole nightmare djinn thing had been messed up from the get-go. The last thing he wants is a repeat performance.

“First things first--it’s a couples retreat, and they aren’t hiring.” She turns to Sam. “You’re still out of commission, right?”

Only a few weeks after he’d recovered from the trials to close Hell, a sneezing toddler in line at Walgreens chose Sam as her next victim. Sam ended up with the most intense case of the flu Dean has ever seen (encounter with Pestilence notwithstanding) and hasn’t been up to anything remotely resembling a hunt since. Dean can’t even remember the last time Sam used the bunker’s gym.

“Until I can run more than twelve feet without feeling like my lungs are trying to eat themselves, yeah,” Sam says, then clears his raspy throat as if to illustrate his point.

“But you’re good for interviewing people, right?”

“Yeah.”

“In that case, the two of us,” Charlie says, pointing between Dean and herself, “are going undercover.”

“And a cuter couple there never was,” Dean says with a wink. Charlie laughs, but Sam looks at him smugly.

“You do realize what just happened, right?”

“What?”

“You were her second choice. She checked to see if I was available first.”

Dean smiles.

“Bite me, Sam.”

“Guys, please stop fighting over me,” Charlie says in a mock-serious tone before turning back to Sam. “Anyway, while Dean and I are checking things out there, you can head to Salem and try to figure out what’s up with the Ortegas. We’ll compare notes and go from there. Sound good?”

“Works for me,” Dean says, and Charlie takes a victorious bite of her breakfast. “And hey, Sam, maybe Cas can go with you. He’s still a little rusty in the interviewing department, so it would be a good--”

“Cas? As in Castiel, Cas?” Charlie interrupts, her brows lifting high.

“Is there another Cas I don’t know about?” Dean asks.

“Last I heard, you were still looking for him.”

Crap, Dean thinks. He grimaces.
“Uh…”

“We found him about a week after he fell,” Sam says, shooting Dean an unimpressed frown. “Dean said he was going to let you know so you could quit checking surveillance footage.”

_Traitor_, Dean thinks, avoiding Charlie’s eyes.

“So he’s been back since May—and it’s now _July_—and this the first I’m hearing about it?”

“I’ll try to be more diligent with the newsletters,” Dean says in an attempt to smartass his way out of her bad graces. It doesn’t work. She glares harder.

“I will throw my waffle at you, Dean.”

Dean eyes the whipped cream and tries again.

“There’s a waffle under there?”

Charlie’s eyes narrow.

“He’s back at the bunker with Kevin” Sam says, dragging them both back to the actual topic.

“Kevin’s around, too?” she asks, and shifts her glare to Sam. “You know, when your friend tells you repeatedly that your other friends sound really cool and she can’t wait to meet them? You’re supposed to introduce them to each other. Why didn’t you bring them both to breakfast?”

“We would have, but they were both up late last night working on this translation project. Figured they could use a couple more hours sleep.”

“They’re probably awake by now,” Sam adds with a glance at the time. “And we’re gonna have to head back to the bunker before we can do anything, so—”

Holding up one finger, Charlie scoops up the last bite of her waffle, eats it, and crosses her knife and fork over her plate.

“To the batcave!” she announces, tossing enough dubiously-acquired money onto the table to cover all their meals. Within two minutes Charlie’s tailing them back to the bunker, her butter-yellow car a happy little flash of color in the Impala’s rearview.

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The bunker smells like smoke when they step inside, and they find Kevin in the kitchen, wearing nothing but a pair of R2D2 boxer shorts and scraping the blackened parts off his burnt toast with a butter knife. He glances up at them when they walk in, then does an embarrassed double-take when he notices Charlie.

He instinctively tries to cover his crotch with the toast for about half a second before he seems to realize what a pointless endeavour it is, and clears his throat as he puts it down on the counter, crossing his arms self-consciously over his chest instead.

“Um. Hi,” he says, looking from Charlie to Sam and Dean.

Sam and Dean burst out laughing. Charlie just barrels into the room to stand right in front of him.

“Dude,” she says, and lifts the edge of her t-shirt, digging into her waistband to yank the top of her own Star Wars underwear out into view. “We’re twins.”
Kevin just stares at her, utterly flustered until Dean takes pity on the poor guy.

“Kevin, this is Charlie. She won’t bite.”

“Charlie?” he repeats, and when she nods his posture shifts from tense-beyond-measure to completely chill. He looks past her at Sam and Dean. “You could have told me she was coming.” Turning back to Charlie, he sticks out his hand for her to shake. “If I’d known I would have put some pants on.”

As they say hello properly Dean nudges Sam.

“Hey, I’m gonna go let Cas know about the hunt. Meet you guys in the library?”

Sam nods, and Dean steps back into the hallway, following it down past his room and on to room seven. The door is still closed, and he can’t hear any movement on the other side of it despite the fact that it’s half-past nine in the morning.

As a human, Cas seems to be making up for all the sleep he didn’t need as an angel.

Dean drums his knuckles on the wall.

“Cas?” he calls through the door. When he gets no response he pushes it open, letting the yellow light of the hallway spill across the floor and Cas’ bed.

He’s hugging his pillow, one foot peeking out from under the blankets, and Dean resists the childish urge to find out if the soles of his feet are ticklish. He leans down and gently nudges Cas’ shoulder. Cas’ hand is vice-like around Dean’s wrist before he’s even opened his eyes.

“Whoa, hey, Cas, it’s just me,” he says, and Cas blinks, loosening his grip after a couple of drawn out seconds and releasing it completely after a few more.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, and Dean shakes his head as he rubs at his wrist.

“Nothing’s wrong,” he says, stepping back to give Cas room when he throws back his blanket and sits up. Dean doesn’t look at his bare chest or the shorts he slept in, instead directing his gaze toward the far safer sight of his sleep-rumpled hair. His fingers tingle. “We’ve got a hunt, though. And Charlie’s here.”

At that, Cas perks up instantly. He’s been eager to meet her ever since he found out that she was the one who’d left the organic honey shampoo in their bathroom.

“I’ll be out in a moment,” he says, rolling his shoulders in a very distracting way as he stands and moves to his dresser. With the top drawer half open, he glances back at Dean. “Is there coffee?”

“There will be,” Dean tells him, lifting his eyes from Cas’ shoulders and rubbing his thumb over his mouth. He clears his throat. “We’ll be in the library.”

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He finds Sam and Kevin laughing madly when he gets to the library, Charlie silently judging them through the steam of her coffee, and he raises his brow as he puts his and Cas’ mugs down on the table.

“What’d I miss?”

“Two preschoolers trapped in adult bodies,” Charlie says.
“Her chair made this noise--” Sam explains, still laughing.

“Allegedly, it was the chair,” Kevin cuts in.

“And her face,” Sam says.

Charlie rolls her eyes and looks up at Dean.

“I thought you were supposed to be the juvenile one.”

Dean looks at her with mock offense.

“I resent that.”

The sound of footsteps in the doorway alerts them all to Cas’ presence, and they turn to find him shuffling into the room. Charlie jumps to her feet and hugs him before he can say a thing.

“It’s so good to finally meet you,” she says, squeezing him tightly, and Cas stares at the others over her shoulder with wide, bewildered eyes.

“And you,” Cas says when she releases him. “Dean said something about a hunt?”

Cas rolls his sleeves up as he takes a seat beside Sam, and Dean tries not to stare. He looks good today.

Dean’s still not quite used to Cas having more than one outfit, even if it’s really a dozen of the same shirt in assorted colors. Dean still wishes he knew who the store clerk was who recommended Cas wear a belt if he was intending to tuck all his plaid shirts into his jeans, because the guy looks like a modern cowboy half the time. It’s a gift that keeps on giving.

By the time Dean’s stopped checking Cas out, Sam’s already finished explaining the gist of the case to Cas. Kevin kicks back in his chair with his coffee balanced on his now t-shirt-clad stomach and lets out a happy sigh.

“What’re you so jazzed about?” Dean asks.

“An empty bunker,” Kevin says, closing his eyes and smiling. “It’s gonna be amazing.”

“Yeah, well just make sure you keep your phone switched on. We might need you to--”

“Research?” Kevin finishes, opening one eye to look at him. “I don’t know, Dean, it’s not like that’s my entire job or anything.”

“There is something I’ve been trying to work out,” Charlie says before Dean can snark back at him. “Weapons are going to be basically impossible to bring in our luggage, so we’re going to have to travel light or come up with some way to sneak everything over.”

“We don’t even know what we’re dealing with,” Dean points out. “That makes traveling light kinda tough.”

“There’s a boat rental company on the north-west side of the lake,” Cas says, looking up from the map of Umpquua National Forest. “Perhaps Sam and I could hire one and bring the weapons to you after dark.”

It’s a good idea, but Dean’s not convinced that Sam should be out on the water when he’s still in recovery mode.
“You think you’d be up to that?” he asks.

“I’ll wear a coat,” Sam replies drily.

Dean fights the urge to argue. He digs his cell from his pocket and looks at Charlie.

“Alright, let’s get this ball rolling. What’s the number?”

Charlie reads it out from a note on her tablet, and as he dials she adds, “We’re going to want cabin eleven if we can get it.”

“Why’s that?”

“I hacked Ancora’s records while I was looking for their security feed,” she explains with a shrug. “They only went three years back, so I don’t know about the Ortegas, but Andre and Lauren were staying in the Deluxe Lake View Cabin, aka cabin eleven.”

“Good thinking,” Sam says.

“I am wise beyond my years,” she says with a grin.

With his cell phone pressed to his ear, Dean wriggles a pen between his thumb and forefinger, watching the way it seems to bend with the motion as he waits for the call to go through.

“Ancora Couples Retreat, this is Lucinda,” a bright voice greets him, and he sits up a little straighter.

“Yeah, hi, can I make a booking for this week?”

Across the table, Dean can see Charlie waving her hands around, and he looks at her with his eyebrow raised. She holds up one of Sam’s big yellow legal pads.

SAY WE’RE ENGAGED, she’s written in big block letters, THEY MIGHT GIVE US FREE STUFF!!!

Charlie gives him an encouraging thumbs up, making Kevin laugh. Dean rolls his eyes.

“My uh, fiancée and I really just need to de-stress before the big day,” he adds to the woman on the line, and Charlie crosses both her fingers, mouthing something that looks like free wine, free wine.

“We can definitely help with that,” Lucinda says.

The price, when she asks for his credit card information, is obscene. Dean has never been happier to commit fraud in his life.

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They hit the road almost immediately.

With a twenty-three hour drive ahead of them, and the ferry to the island leaving at 11:30am sharp, there’s no time to waste.

Squeezed into the Impala, with a blade of every kind stashed in the trunk—along with some holy oil, a couple of spell books, a few talismans and herbs, and the usual collection of guns—they head north on US-281 and into Nebraska.
Dean takes the first shift, followed by Sam, and then Dean (reluctantly) hands the keys to Cas. It’s not that he doesn’t think he’s a good driver. If that were the case, Dean would have hidden the keys to the junker Cas picked up a week after they found him so he couldn’t drive at all.

But it’s a little after midnight, and Dean doesn’t particularly trust any of the other drivers on the road.

Really, Cas handles the Impala like a pro. It’s only his third time behind her wheel, but he drives like the car is an extension of himself. It makes sense. Up until recently, that’s how he treated the body he’s walking around in.

Dean tries not to think about that too often.

To distract himself from staring at Cas, Dean flicks through the list of past oddities at Hemlock Lake and the Umpqua National Forest that Charlie compiled on her tablet.

There have been multiple Bigfoot sightings, a few UFO’s, and countless missing people in the surrounding national forest that track back for centuries.

He barely skims the UFO and Bigfoot sightings--both are notorious hoaxes, no matter how many times they come across them--but the missing person reports are worth his attention. Most of them seem pretty cut and dry. In the vast majority of cases, the lost hikers were eventually found dead of exposure or starvation.

It looks like the Ortegas are the first to make a spontaneous reappearance in decades.

A nearby caldera lake on Mount Mazama is considered by the Klamath people to be a crossroads between powerful spirits and the source of massive amounts of otherworldly energy, but Hemlock Lake is frustratingly lacking in the mythology department. There’s not even one lake monster legend.

Dean gives up on reading around three in the morning when his eyes start to sting.

In the back seat, he can hear Sam snoring, and when he glances back he grins at the sight of him half sprawled over Charlie’s shoulder.

“You should try to get some sleep, too,” Cas says quietly as he overtakes a slow-moving station wagon, and Dean shifts in his seat to look at him.

“Can’t sleep sitting up,” he lies.

“I’ve seen you sleep sitting up,” Cas replies, glancing over with a squint.

“Yeah, well,” Dean hedges, and scrubs at his stinging eyes, knowing that a few hours of sleep would do wonders to make that horrible sandpapery feeling go away. “Not while you’re driving, I can’t.”

Cas casts him an offended look, and Dean tries not to feel guilty about it.

Up ahead, the lights of a 24-hour diner and gas station--advertised every ten miles for the past hundred--cast a hazy orange glow over the road.

“Hey, take the exit,” Dean says, gesturing toward the ramp, and though Cas does as he asked, he frowns.
“You’re not driving again yet. We agreed to seven hour shifts,” he says, tone leaving no room for argument.

“Wasn’t planning to,” Dean says, and gestures toward the dash. “Pretty sure the car’s gettin’ thirsty, though.”

With a quick glance at the fuel gauge, presumably to make sure Dean isn’t bullshitting him, Cas nods and follows the bending exit ramp to the right. He pulls up at the pump closest to the building and slides out of the car fluidly, heading for the door as Dean makes his way to the back of the car to unscrew the cap. Dean doesn’t even need to ask him to pick up snacks—by now it’s all part of a familiar pattern established over a few weeks of working side by side while Sam got his rest and drove Kevin up the wall.

As he waits for the tank to fill, he watches Cas through the window of the gas station and allows himself to really appreciate how good it’s been spending time together. Working on small cases, instead of a constant stream of end-of-the-world disasters.

There’s a long list of things Dean has wanted for years. Most of them are pipe dreams. He’d always assumed that all of the things he’d wanted concerning Cas were about as likely as God turning up and apologizing for all the crap he’s put them through.

But somehow he got the most important one; Cas came back to the bunker, and he stayed. Though he’s practically human now, he’s okay. They’re all okay, aside from Sam’s lingering flu, but in their lives that’s about as serious as a stubbed toe.

He’s still thinking about how good he’s got it when Cas emerges from the gas station with two cups of coffee and a plastic bag of bottled water and pretzels. He keeps thinking about it as they both climb back into the car, and as he takes his first sip of what turns out to be hot chocolate.

“You need to sleep,” Cas tells him before he can complain about the lack of caffeine, and Dean huffs before taking another sip. “I’ll wake you when it’s your turn to drive.”

His first thought is you’re lucky I love you, and he’s glad that he’s drinking something so that there’s no chance of his half-asleep mouth blurting the words out.

“Fine,” he says once he’s swallowed. “I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask.”

“No promises,” Dean adds, and Cas smiles a little as he sips at his actual coffee. “Don’t look so smug.”

He drifts off just after dawn, and when he wakes three hours later it’s to find Sam behind the wheel, pulling into Ancora’s parking lot.

Sleep deprivation isn’t his only excuse for what happens next, but it’s high on the list.
Dean’s still blinking sleep from his eyes when he makes his way through the double glass doors of Ancora’s reception building. His duffel is heavy on his shoulder. He rolls his neck from side to side, willing the motion to relieve a little of the muscle strain. Sleeping in a car has never been fun, and it ain’t getting any easier with age.

“Good morning!” the receptionist greets him as he makes his way to the desk. Behind her, a wide window offers a stunning view of Hemlock lake and the mountain range beyond.

“Morning,” Dean replies, yawning halfway through the word. She smiles.

“How drive?”

“Very,” he says.

She tuts under her breath and leans to the side a little to look past his shoulder.

“Is your partner--”

“Phone call,” he lies. “Workaholic, y’know. Vacation won’t start until the battery dies.”

In truth, Charlie is out at the car, giving Sam a last minute rundown on how to get around Ancora’s very recently updated security system. They hopefully won’t need it, but if Dean and Charlie run into any trouble it’ll help to know that Sam and Cas can access the CCTV footage.

The receptionist just nods in understanding.

“My husband is the same. Now, let’s get you checked in, Mr--?”

“Dean Townshend,” he says, digging his wallet out of his pocket.

“Excellent,” she says, accepting his ID with a nod before entering something into her computer and handing it back. “And your partner’s name?”

“His name’s Cas,” Dean replies. It takes a moment for him to realize his error, but by then it’s too late.

"And does he spell that with one ‘s’ or two?” she asks, her fingers hovering over her keyboard as she waits with a patient smile. Dean actively works on not swallowing his own tongue.

"Uh… sorry. Excuse me just… one moment," he stutters, and hurries outside before he manages to make things even worse.

Over a steady current of inwardly-shouted expletives, punctuating each heavy footstep across the asphalt of the parking lot, he scrambles to come up with a way to explain what just happened without sounding like a complete and utter jackass. By the time the Impala comes into view, he’s convinced that there isn’t one.

None besides the truth, that is, which is that for weeks, Dean’s been introducing Cas as his partner. He’s said some variation on I'm Agent Whoever and this is my partner So-and-so to nearly every person they’ve come across since they teamed up. It’s become instinct. Second nature.

"Fuck," he says under his breath. "Shit."
He’s pretty damn eloquent when he’s panicking, if he does say so himself.

When he reaches the car, Charlie slams the trunk closed. She looks up when she hears his muttered cursing and lowers her oversized sunglasses on her nose.

"Little tense, honey?" she says, barely keeping a straight face, and Dean can’t do this. He covers his face with his hands.

"I messed up," he groans through his fingers.

Charlie ducks closer, dropping her voice.

"What happened? Is our cover blown?"

"Uh... not... entirely?"

The driver’s side door creaks open, and when Dean dares to look he finds Sam watching him with concern across the glossy roof. Cas, thankfully, is still inside the car, partially obscured by the sun’s glare on the glass. At least, he was obscured, right up until Dean looked at him. Now, he’s unwinding the damn window.

“What’s going on?” Cas asks, brow furrowed.

Briefly, Dean entertains the idea of making up some lie about how they had to cancel the reservation, or that the island sank somehow, or anything that will get him out of telling the truth. He can’t come up with anything that sounds even remotely convincing.

Shit, he thinks again.

"She uh, the receptionist. She was checking us in," he starts with his gaze firmly fixed on a tree on the edge of the parking lot. He puts his hands on his hips until he realizes how stupid he looks and lets them hang at his sides instead. "So I gave her my phony details, Dean Townshend, yada yada, and then... she, uh... she asked me, uh..."

He scrubs at his face. Looks from the tree up to the dark clouds gathering overhead, and wonders about the chances of a storm. It’s probably not safe to take the little ferry over if there’s a storm. Maybe they’ll luck out, and he can still--

"She asked you what?" Sam prompts. Dean exhales slow through his nose.

"She asked for my partner's name."

"And?"

"I said... uh," he gulps. Shakes his head. “I accidentally said Cas."

"Holy crap," Charlie laughs, and claps her hand over her mouth when Dean glares at her. He pointedly doesn’t look at Cas. Sam, meanwhile, looks like he’s torn between cackling and saying something annoyingly helpful.

"Shut up all of you," Dean says, squeezing his nose between thumb and forefinger. “It was like I was on autopilot from last week. We were FBI partners, remember?"

"Well, look, it's okay," Charlie says, hefting her bag higher up onto her shoulder. "They only needed one ID for the booking, right? Cas could easily be a girl's name. I'll just go by that while we're here. I’ll be Cassidy or Cassandra or something."
"I literally said the words his name is Cas."

"Oh my god, Dean,” Charlie says.

“It just slipped out,” Dean says pointlessly.

"Okay,” Sam says, leaning against the car and doing an impressive job of holding back his laughter. “So Charlie can’t go. What do you wanna do?”

Dean’s got nothing, so he waits for someone else to come up with a solution. Sam clears his throat after a moment.

“Far as I see it, we’ve got two options,” he says.

“Shoot,” Dean says.

“We scrap this plan, find someplace to stay in town, and Charlie and Cas can work the FBI angle.”

Dean scrunches up his nose. As impressive as Cas and Charlie’s progress as hunters may be, they’re nowhere near ready to impersonate agents without experienced backup. Not to mention the limited time and constant shadows they’d have if they were there under the guise of a federal investigation.

“Pass,” Dean says.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” Sam says.

“What’s option two?”

Sam’s gaze drifts down to Cas, and Dean’s eyes widen as he sees the next terrifying suggestion forming before he’s even opened his mouth.

"Don't even say it."

"Cas could step in,” Sam says anyway, and for the first time since he opened his window, Dean lets himself look at the man in question. Cas blinks up at him.

“I’d have no problem with that,” he says with a completely neutral expression. Dean’s mouth goes bone dry.

He’d be lying if he said that the idea of playing happy couples with Cas for a week isn’t appealing. As potentially damaging as it may be, he’s big enough to admit to himself that any excuse to spend some time up close and personal with the guy is a good one. But he also knows that it’s going to suck when he has to give it up.

Still, there’s no good reason to refuse. The missing people aren’t going to miraculously save themselves, and they’re shit out of other options. Resigned, he sighs.

“Okay,” he says.

Cas smiles and climbs out of the car, easy as anything, as Charlie works the fake engagement ring she’s wearing from her finger. She hands it over. When Cas tries to slip it on, it won’t go past the knuckle.

“Maybe I just won’t wear a ring,” Cas says with a frown, but Dean’s already shaking two silver bands from the pocket in his wallet.
He’s planning to lend him the one he picked up at a flea market a few months back. It’s old and worn down along one edge, marked on the inside with a symbol that he’d mistaken for something magical but had turned out to be a particularly stylized set of initials when he’d looked at it properly. Naturally, it’s too big.

Dean slides it onto his own finger and looks at the second ring.

It was Mary’s, once. A lifetime ago. Dean’s been carrying it around in his wallet for years, the edge pressing a permanent mark into the leather. If he’d ever allowed himself to imagine giving someone this ring—if such fantasies were anything other than incredibly pointless and too self destructive even for him—it wouldn’t have been like this.

He holds it out.

“Don’t lose it,” he says, hiding the truth of his discomfort under unnecessary bluster. “It’s all I’ve got of Mom, and I want it back in one piece when we’re done.”

Cas just takes it and slips it on with a quiet of course, barely making eye contact. It fits perfectly.

***

The receptionist is on the phone when Dean makes his way back into the office with Cas at his side. She smiles at them, indicating with a wave of her hand that she’ll only be a moment.

Dean glances over at Cas and wonders if they should be standing closer—if it’s going to be obvious to her that they aren’t a couple.

Cas, apparently feeling Dean’s eyes on him, turns and tilts his head.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, shifting his hand-me-down duffel of belongings onto his other shoulder in a way that reminds Dean that he gets aches and pains now. The knowledge shouldn’t still sneak up on him like this. It’s been close to two months since Cas fell.

Still, Dean can’t help but feel guilty every time he’s reminded of what Cas lost. He might not have been directly responsible, but he’s sure Cas would still be hanging out on some heavenly cloud if Dean hadn’t started dragging him down into the mud as soon as they met.

“Dean?” Cas says again, and with a look back at the receptionist, still explaining something to the person on the phone, Dean nods his head away from the desk.

When they’re far enough to be sure she won’t hear them, he turns to Cas.

“I’m just worried we’re gonna get made,” he says quietly.

“Why?”

“Because it’s gonna be obvious we aren’t actually a couple.”

Cas frowns.

“Why will that be obvious?”

“I dunno. We didn’t have enough time to work out our backstory,” he says, and shifts uncomfortably. “And because we’re not, y’know. Gay or whatever.”

Cas’s frown only deepens.
“Charlie isn’t attracted to men,” he says simply. Dean blinks at him.

“What?”

“Charlie isn’t attracted to men, and she was going to pretend to be your fiancée anyway. How is your lack of attraction to men any different than hers?”

Dean opens his mouth and finds that he’s got no good answer to that.

He doesn’t so much lack an interest in men as he does repress it with a vengeance. He’s worried about the possibility that if he lets that part of himself out of the shadows, even like this, it’s going to be difficult to put it back in. The fact that he’ll have to direct any of it toward Cas is just an added layer of heartache that he’d rather not deal with.

He’s beginning to feel like he’s the subject of some cosmic joke. Hell, maybe he is. He’s pissed off enough deities.

He rubs the back of his neck.

“I don’t know,” he says lamely. “It’s not different, I guess. I just figured that Charlie and me would, hold hands. Or I’d put my arm around her or kiss her cheek or something every now and then. And we had a backstory. We’d worked it all out.”

The backstory was great, too. Charlie really went all out with the detail.

“I was there when you worked out the story, so as long as you don’t accidentally talk about Charlie by mistake, it will be fine. And as for the rest—”

He looks down at Dean’s hand and slips his left into it like it’s nothing. To him, Dean realizes, it probably is nothing. Cas’s hand is warm and far softer than it has any business being, and Dean can feel the cool metal band around his ring finger.

It’s a harsh reminder of just how unrequited his feelings are. Dean tries not to think about it.

“And just so you know,” Cas adds quietly, squeezing his hand and bringing him back into the moment. “I’m okay with those other things, too. Just do whatever you’re comfortable with.”

Dean bites down on the inside of his cheek to distract himself. This week is going to be hell.

“Mr Townshend?” the receptionist calls out, and Dean snaps his head up to look at her. He’s blushing; he can feel the heat of it spreading rapidly across his cheeks and down his neck.

“C’mon,” he says to Cas, voice gruff, and they make their way back over to finish checking in.

Dean doesn’t let go of Cas’ hand until he has to sign his name.

***

The ride over to the island is a little rocky, and halfway there Dean notices Cas gripping the edge of his seat with white knuckles, his face drawn and pale.

He’s been quiet since they made their way onto the small ferry, and Dean had assumed that Cas was just giving him space. Now, he’s not so sure. Shifting on his seat, he nudges Cas’ denim-clad knee with his own.

“You alright, buddy?” he asks, and Cas swallows thickly.
“Perhaps I caught Sam’s flu,” he says after a moment, and swallows again, his jaw tensing with the motion. Dean lifts his hand and presses the back of it to Cas’ forehead. It’s cool and dry.

“You don’t have a fever,” he says, dropping his hand away when Cas opens his eyes. “I think you’re just a little sea sick.”

“We’re not on the sea,” Cas argues.

“Lake sick, then,” Dean amends, trying not to laugh at the look on his face. “You’ll be alright.”

“My mouth is producing far too much saliva,” Cas informs him gravely, swallowing again, and Dean rests his hand against his back, dragging it up and down.

“Just close your eyes and breathe through it. We’ll be there soon. No need to toss your cookies.”

“I haven’t eaten any cookies,” Cas tells him with a stubborn frown, but he swallows convulsively and does as Dean says, breathing slowly in through his nose and out through his mouth.

Dean drags his eyes away after a moment, but leaves his hand in place as he looks out over the water toward their destination. Under his palm, he can feel the warmth of Cas’ skin through the cotton of his black and blue plaid. The slow rise and fall of his breath. The hard edge of his shoulder blades.

Without any real choice in the matter Dean commits every single sensation to memory.

“He’s not one for boats, I take it,” a passenger sitting on the opposite side of the ferry says, nodding toward him, and Dean shakes his head.

“I guess not.”

The guy frowns, and the woman he’s got his arm draped around frowns with pity.

“Shouldn’t be long until we get there,” she says, glancing at her watch. “Maybe five minutes?”

True to her word, they arrive shortly after. Cas jolts when the ferry bumps against the dock, looking around wildly, and Dean squeezes his shoulder before taking his hand back.

He’s barely on his feet before Cas has scrambled onto the dock, where he leans heavily against a lamp post, a look on his face like he’s barely hanging on to the contents of his stomach. While he recovers, Dean hefts both their bags off the boat.

The click of heels on wood catches his attention as he shoulders Cas’ duffel, and when he looks up there’s a short blonde woman with a wide smile and a smattering of freckles making her way toward them on the dock. A silvery pin on the lapel of her blazer catches the sun, almost blindingly bright. Just ahead of her, a man in similar uniform sends a wave to the other couple still making their way off the ferry.

“Welcome to Ancora!” the woman says, sticking out her hand when she gets near enough. “I’m Avery, I’ll be looking after you this week.”

“Dean,” he introduces himself, shaking her hand before nodding toward Cas, who’s still leaning against the post. “Cas here got a little queasy on the ride over.”

“Pleased to m--” Cas starts, then swallows again, taking a deep breath and gripping the post a little tighter.
“Oh, dear,” Avery says, casting a sympathetic frown toward him before turning to Dean. “In that case, let’s get you two settled in nice and quick.”

At the end of the dock, Avery leads them past another Ancora employee who is wishing two young couples a safe trip home, and into a small stone building. The interior is fitted with a couple of couches and a vending machine which stands to the side of a departure schedule, informing them that boats off the island leave at noon and 3 P.M. daily.

Moving briskly through the room, she taps a few buttons on the vending machine, swipes a card that hangs around her neck on a lanyard, and hands Cas a bottle of ginger ale.

He accepts it hesitantly, but after a couple of small sips the color starts to return to his face, and he lets out a contented sigh.

“Thanks,” Dean tells her for him. Avery smiles brightly.

“Usually does the trick,” she says, and waits until Cas has screwed the lid back onto the bottle. “Better?”

“Much better,” he confirms. “Thank you.”

“Excellent,” Avery says, and claps her hands together as though she doesn’t have to do this every day. “This way!”

Back outside the building, they follow Avery along a short path to a row of blue golf carts, their hoods painted with large white numbers.

“This one is all yours for the duration of your stay,” she says, pulling a key from her pocket and leading them to the one on the end, marked with the number eleven. “Sunstone isn’t a particularly big island, but the cabins are on the opposite side from everything else, and that hill can be a real killer on the legs at the end of the day.”

“Awesome,” Dean says. He takes the key when she offers it, peering at the awkward location of the hand brake when she points it out.

“Now it bears mentioning that the golf carts are quicker than they look,” she explains as Dean puts their bags onto the little shelf at the back. “Make sure not to put your foot down too hard, because you’ll take off a whole lot faster than you’re expecting to.”

In the next parking bay is a white cart marked STAFF #3, and Avery hops into the driver’s seat.

“If you’ll follow me, I’ll give you a quick tour and then we’ll get you to your cabin. Be careful on the corners!”

After a slightly bumpy start--she really wasn’t kidding about the cart only having two settings--they follow Avery uphill along a narrow road flanked by quaking aspen, birch and cottonwood. They turn left at the first intersection and pass two couples driving in the opposite direction. Avery toots her horn at both of them, and while the first couple--in their mid-sixties at Dean’s best guess--waves cheerfully back, the second doesn’t even respond. It’s only a few minutes before they arrive in what passes for the downtown area on the tiny resort island.

To the left of the road, a small glowing sign set into an ornamental rock identifies the curved, modern building beyond as Bon Vivant, the five-star restaurant where Andre Freeman and Lauren Pratt were last seen. To the right is a salon, a massage parlor, a gallery-slash-souvenir shop, and a tiny general store. Avery points out a road marked Relaxation Way that sweeps down behind the
four buildings, telling them that it leads to the rest of the island’s amenities.

Avery parks her cart in a tiny space outside a building on the other side of Relaxation Way, and Dean pulls in beside her. She points out the sign on the building’s door that identifies it as a combined information desk, security office, and infirmary.

“You’re welcome to keep to yourselves if you’d like, but there are plenty of activities available for guests if you want to participate. Now, if you’ll just wait here one moment--”

She hops from her cart, ducking into the building, and Dean glances over at Cas.

“Can you imagine being that chipper all the time?” he asks.

Cas doesn’t get a chance to respond before Avery emerges, carrying a picnic hamper.

“Before I forget; the kitchen at Bon Vivant is open from seven until eleven in the morning, and seven until ten in the evening. Or you can order room service at any time if you’d prefer to remain in your cabin.”

She says the last part with a little wink that makes Dean’s chest ache.

“What’s in the basket?” Cas asks, either ignoring her wink or--more likely--completely oblivious to it as he gestures toward the hamper. She cracks it open to show them.

“Each day at breakfast you’ll have the opportunity to choose from our selection of lunch hampers, which we’ll deliver to you around midday. Because today is your first day here, you’ve got a bit of everything. You’ll find the full menu in your cabin.”

Looking at the spread of food, Dean’s stomach rumbles loudly. Avery laughs, closing the lid.

“Well, I suppose that’s our cue,” she says, and they climb back into their cart to follow her.

After they pass the intersection leading back down to the dock, the trees grow more dense before giving way to the first two cabins. There are trees between them and the next two cabins, and more between those and the next.

When they reach cabin eleven, Avery points them in the direction of the smallest carport Dean has ever seen. By the time he and Cas reach the door she’s standing beside it with the hamper at her feet.

She takes two keycards from a hidden pocket inside her blazer and swipes one through a scanner on the door, unlocking it with a beep just as the clouds that have been threatening rain all morning make good on their promise.

“These are your keys,” she says, handing the cards over. Each is attached to a garish purple lanyard, printed with their first names and the heart-and-anchor logo of Ancora. “If you need anything at all, dial star-one on either of the phones inside. Our service desk is staffed 24/7.”

With that, she beams, tells them to have a great afternoon, and drives off in her golf cart with a perky toot of the horn.

Dean looks at Cas and pushes out a loud breath.

“Jesus, that took forever.”

“At least she was thorough,” Cas says, lifting the edge of the hamper to take another peek inside.
“Are you hungry?”

Dean’s stomach grumbles again. He pats it absently.

“Starving,” he says, but to Cas’ visible dismay, he covers the food. “We should check the room for hex bags first, though.”

Cas frowns, but agrees.

The cabin’s interior is open-plan and extravagant, with a large, circular fireplace at the center that separates the living area and kitchenette from the bedroom.

A sand-colored love seat sits before the fire, draped with a luxurious brown mink blanket and accentuated with two moose-adorned cushions that Dean immediately snaps a picture of and sends to Sam. A single step down on the other side of the fire brings them to a single, huge bed and a swanky bathroom. A door on the opposite wall leads out to a deck which wraps around the cabin, overlooking the lake.

Dean can kind of see why this place was so expensive.

He does a quick sweep with the EMF meter, which doesn’t make a peep, and then together they scour every inch of the cabin. The entire search takes almost an hour.

The floor under the love seat is clear even of dust-bunnies, as is the floor under the bed, but when Dean pulls the chest of drawers away from the bedroom wall, Cas makes a little aha sound, and Dean thinks they’ve finally found something.

When he stands up, though, Dean sees it’s just a box of condoms that had fallen down behind it, abandoned by some long-gone guest. Cas holds the box up, dusting the package off to read the fine print on the label. Dean takes them from him before he can start asking awkward questions.

Out of habit he checks the expiration date--still good--and tosses them into his duffel before pushing the drawers back into place.

When he looks back, Cas is watching him with a raised brow. Dean clears his throat and makes his way into the bathroom, which is the only place they have yet to check.

It’s as spotless as the rest of the cabin. Nothing is out of place, from the gleaming tile of the spacious shower, to the basket of complimentary soaps and shampoos by the sink.

“Nothing up here, either,” Dean says after feeling around inside the light fixture for a moment. “Looks like the cabin is clean.”

“So we’re done?”

“Looks like.”

Dean screws the cover back onto the light, and Cas is out of the room and noisily opening the hamper before he can climb down from his perch on the edge of the sink.

***

Outside, the drizzle makes the trunks of the birch trees silvery bright, and Dean stands by the front window as he polishes off a mini meatball sub.

“So much for summer,” he says through his last bite, and licks sauce from his fingers. “We’re
definitely getting these again tomorrow, by the way.”

“The pasta salad, too,” Cas says from his seat, where he’s working on a bowl of it and eying the remaining items in the hamper. “Should we go to the restaurant today? Both couples were last seen there.”

“It doesn’t open for another four hours,” Dean tells him with a glance at his watch, and drops down onto the love seat beside him. It’s small enough that it’s impossible to sit side by side without touching. Dean suspects this is a deliberate furniture choice to ensure maximum canoodling, considering that this is meant to be a romantic getaway location.

Cas bumps him with his elbow as he takes another bite of pasta salad and makes a happy little noise in the back of his throat. Dean laughs, thrilled when it results in an embarrassed look on Cas’ face when he glances over at him.

“It’s very good,” Cas says in defense.

“I can see that,” Dean answers with a wry grin, looking pointedly at the nearly-empty bowl. Cas scoops the last of the pasta onto his fork.

“Here.”

He hands it over, and Dean takes it without thinking. Once he’s holding it, though, he just stares at it. He feels weird about sharing a fork with Cas.

The list of people he’s shared silverware with as an adult is exactly one person long, and even then it was only when Lisa had offered him a bite of some decadent chocolate fudge thing on a rare date night. Sharing a fork is intimate, but when Cas asks why he’s just staring at it, Dean can’t tell him that. Not in those words. He pulls a face instead.

“I’m not big on swapping spit with someone unless we’re, y’know, swapping spit.”

As soon as he finishes the sentence he realizes how dangerous a corner he’s backed himself into, and he clears his throat to continue before Cas says anything else.

“It’s just gross,” he lies. “Like… sharing a toothbrush, or a razor, or… I don’t know, underwear or something.”

“You loaned me your razor when I first became human,” Cas says, narrowing his eyes as he pokes holes in Dean’s bullshit. “And two pairs of boxer shorts until we had time to go to Hastings.”

“But--”

“Fine, I’ll eat it,” Cas says, and takes the fork back before Dean can change his mind.

He doesn’t look disappointed about it, either, closing his eyes and humming as he chews. As soon as he’s done, he puts the empty bowl on the coffee table and reaches for the hamper, ready to try the next thing. He really seems to like the grapes.

“So,” Dean says, forcing himself to speak so he doesn’t just end up sitting here with his whole left side pressed up against Cas for no good reason. “What do you say we take a drive around and see if there’s any EMF? Nothing’s really pointing to a ghost so far, but we might as well see what we can find.”

It’s hard to tell, seeing as the words come around a mouthful of baguette, but Dean’s pretty sure
that Cas says it’s a good idea. He claps him on the knee and gets to his feet, heading down into the bedroom to get the meter from his bag.

***

The golf cart beeps loudly as Dean reverses it out onto the narrow road, and instead of driving back toward the middle of the island he heads west.

The road leads them past four cabins before eventually hooking left and leading down to an area of the island’s south side that Cas tells him is called Applegate Cove.

“It’s because there’s a clear view of Applegate Peak from here,” he explains.

Dean looks across the water toward the top of the rocky mountain on the other side, barely visible through the misty rain.

“Not today, there isn’t.”

He pulls to a stop alongside the cove, where a tall cottonwood offers a little shelter from the drizzle. A pier stretches out over the lake.

“Say anything in there about fishing?”

Cas hums to himself as he skims the page, and taps something at the bottom with his index finger.

“Kokanee Salmon and Rainbow Trout were introduced to Hemlock Lake at the end of the nineteenth century,” he reads aloud before skipping ahead. “Fishing gear, rowboats, and kayaks are available for hire through the information desk.”

Dean climbs out of the cart, switching on the EMF meter before sticking it into his pocket where it won’t get wet.

“If we get any downtime, I say we head out on the water and try and catch ourselves a few. Nothing better than cooking a fish you caught yourself.”

“Another boat?” Cas asks warily.

“You’re not gonna get seasick in a rowboat, Cas,” Dean tells him. “We wouldn’t take it out unless the water was calm, anyway.”

“Oh. That sounds nice, actually,” Cas tells him with a smile, and Dean does his best to ignore the pathetic little flutter in his chest that the simple comment causes. He puts one earphone in and leads the way down to the pier.

The meter is silent all the way to the end, and it stays that way as they slowly walk the length of the cove and the picnic area nearby, only passing two couples along the way. By the time they return to the golf cart the weather has cleared, and they head back up the hill.

***

They’ve just arrived back at cabin eleven when Dean’s cellphone starts ringing, and he answers on speaker while Cas closes the door.

“What’s up?”

“We managed to get a hold of the security footage,” Sam says.
“Anything good?”

“Maybe?” Charlie says, and he can picture the scrunch of her nose from her tone alone. “Andre left the restaurant at seven-o-four, paced up and down in front for a couple of minutes without lighting his cigarette, then took something out of his pocket. He looked at it for a few seconds, shoved it back in his pocket, and then walked out of frame to the right.”

“You couldn’t see what it was?”

“It was pretty small, but we think it might have been a ring box,” Sam says.

“Okay. What about Lauren?”

“She came out at twenty to eight on the dot. Looked like she called out to Andre a couple of times, then it started raining. She started to head back inside, but then she saw something to the right, where Andre had walked. She looked confused and then relieved, and went the same way as Andre. That’s the last footage of them.”

“She must have seen him,” Cas says, and Dean nods at him before thinking out loud.

“So they went to the right of the restaurant… that’s the amphitheater, I think.”

“It would be to the left of the restaurant,” Charlie says. “The camera’s mounted on the building itself.”

“It looked like there was a path leading down to the beach on that side,” Dean says with a nod. “We’ll check it out. What time are you guys heading across tonight?”

“That’s actually the other reason we called,” Sam says, his voice taking on the reluctant tone he uses when he has to deliver bad news. “Slight change of plans.”

“What? Why?”

“We were just grabbing a bite, and our waitress mentioned that there’s supposed to be a big storm tonight,” Sam tells them. “Charlie looked it up, and they’re saying it’s going to be the biggest summer storm in about a decade.”

“So boating is a no-go,” Charlie adds, voice a little distant through the phone.

“That’s probably wise,” Cas says.

Rubbing at the bridge of his nose, Dean sighs.

“Allright, well I guess we’ll lay low another day, and you guys can bring everything tomorrow night instead?”

“Yeah, that’s what we figured. The storm is supposed to pass by morning,” Sam tells them. “Anyway, how’s it going over there? Have you found anything?”

“Nothing yet,” Dean says. “Cabin was clear, no hexbags or EMF anywhere.”

“We’re just about to inspect the rest of the island now,” Cas informs him.

“Okay, well just let us know.”

“And be careful,” Charlie adds. “I don’t want to row over there with a boat full of weapons and
find out you’ve already been kidnapped by a magic plesiosaur.”

“For what it’s worth, that’s highly unlikely,” Cas tells her with an amused smile. “But we’ll be careful.”

Dean snorts.

“Talk to you tomorrow,” he says.

Ending the call, Dean looks over at Cas.

“If we get through the rest of the EMF readings this afternoon, it looks like we might get to be tourists tomorrow,” Dean says.

Cas smiles.

“I like the sound of that.”

His smile is contagious, and Dean wears one of his own as he leads the way outside and climbs back into the driver’s seat. The golf cart emits a low hum as it starts, barely loud enough to hear, and Cas settles in beside him, lifting one hand to wrap around the roof-support pole by his shoulder.

Main Street is considerably busier than it had been earlier in the day, so Dean decides to leave it for later. He turns down Relaxation Way instead, following the road downhill and parking in a space at the southeastern corner of the island.

Slowly, they make their way around the hot tubs, through a picnic area and up past the gym before looping back around the lap pool and a tennis court. A young couple are kissing deeply over the net at the center, their rackets hanging forgotten from their hands. The EMF meter doesn’t make a sound.

It stays silent as they approach the lagoon pool and it’s nearby bar, where the older couple they’d passed on the road earlier are talking to the bartender over their gin and tonics, while a guy with a wide, goofy smile cannonballs into the water, making his partner shriek as it splashes out over them where they lay on a poolside banana lounge in yellow short-shorts and a NASA t-shirt.

“Still nothing,” Cas says, looking intently at the meter, and Dean sighs.

“Back to Main Street, I guess.”

Cas switches off the meter, sticking it into his pocket, and they head back to their cart.
When they arrive back on Main Street it’s to the welcoming sight of sunlight. There are still clouds on the horizon, threatening more rain, but for now the weather has turned warm.

A few couples are seated around a low stone table in a courtyard off to the side of the restaurant, where the bar is already open. They’re all chatting happily as they drink bright blue cocktails from tall glasses.

“Looks like happy hour started early,” Dean says with a smirk in Cas’ direction. He shrugs off his jacket, lifts the golf cart’s driver’s seat and sticks it in the compartment beneath. Cas does the same, but his hand hesitates over the EMF meter still in his jacket pocket.

“Should we try to get a reading now?” Cas asks.

Dean takes another look around before shaking his head and closing the seat over. It’s too busy.

“Probably better to wait until it’s quieter,” he says, just as one of the women--young and freckled, with curly sun-bleached hair piled on top of her head in such a way that it makes her seem five inches taller than she is--glances up and sees them. She says something to the rest of the group, and they all turn to look. Dean feels a little like he’s under a microscope.

“New people!” the woman calls out, jumping up and excitedly waving them over. Definitely not on her first cocktail. “Hey, new people! Come have a drink with us!”

Dean sends an awkward little wave back, and Cas catches his elbow as he starts toward them.

“Is this a good idea?” Cas asks quietly, barely moving his mouth.

“Might as well find out if any of them have seen anything,” Dean says, and clears his throat. “You ready to act, uh… couple-y?”

Cas gives him a nervous nod. It’s a relief to see, if Dean’s being honest. A sign that maybe this isn’t going to be quite as easy for Cas as he’d thought. Knowing that he’s not the only one out of his comfort zone makes it a little easier to feign the confidence he doesn’t currently have.

Steeling himself, Dean winks and plants one hand on Cas’ lower back, steering him toward the bar where the sound of acoustic guitar and a sweet voice is overlaid by the chatter of couples. There’s a woman who could be Scarlett Johansson’s twin seated on a small stage by the bar, plucking strings as she sings. Dean reminds himself that checking out the entertainment while he’s meant to be giving the impression of a loving fiancé is probably a bad idea, and shifts his appraising gaze back to the side of Cas’ face.

It helps that he finds Cas damn attractive.

When they reach the courtyard, the woman who called out to them pulls a cigarette from her mouth and butts it out in an ashtray on the table.

“Welcome!” she says with a flourish of her hands that has her cocktail sloshing over the rim of the glass. “You both need drinks. I’m getting you drinks.”

“Wouldn’t say no to that,” Dean replies, a little bemused when she spins on her heel and heads for the bar without even asking their names or what they want, and he looks around at the other five
faces all staring up at them. “How’s it going?”

There’s a general chorus of great, thanks, and then Cas clears his throat.

“I suspect this would be a good time to introduce ourselves.”

He’s completely earnest in his delivery, and when Dean looks at him his expression is so endearing that Dean has no trouble at all slipping into the act. He slides his hand from where it’s still resting on Cas’s back to his side and pulls him a little closer.

“Well, the whirlwind was my girlfriend, Cadence,” a stubbled man sitting beside the now empty seat says, his long brown hair wound into a bun on the back of his head. He has the hint of an Irish accent, though it’s faded in the manner of someone who’s lived stateside for most of their adult life. “I’m Adrian.”

He’s warm and friendly as he transfers his drink to his left hand and offers the right to shake, but compared to the energy of his girlfriend, Adrian might as well be comatose.

“I’m Priya,” a statuesque woman on the other side pipes up, tucking her long dark hair over her ear, and the gangly man beside her gives a little wave.

“Brian,” he says.

“And that’s Lori and Val,” Cadence says of the remaining couple as she returns with two cocktails in tall glasses, identical to those of everyone else around the table. “But we’ve all already known each other a few days, which makes you two the interesting ones. Sit, sit.”

They do, sinking into the nearest seat--built for two, naturally--and Cadence moves as though she’s going to hand the drinks over before holding them back at the last moment.

Grinning, she raises an expectant eyebrow that somehow Cas catches onto first.

“I’m Cas,” he says, and she grins wider as she hands it over.

“Dean,” Dean says, accepting the drink and taking a wary sip. It tastes like rum and pineapples... and more rum. Not half bad, considering it looks like Smurf blood. “Thanks.”

She waves off his gratitude and sinks back into her chair, crossing her long legs.

“Don’t mention it,” she says with practiced ease, and Val, a woman with spiky black hair and a toothy smile, lets out a laugh.

“Cadence and Adrian have a never-ending bar tab,” she explains.

“We won a contest,” Adrian says with a happy shrug, taking another sip of his drink.

“You’re going to get kicked off the island for abusing the terms of the prize,” Brian says, picking up his own cocktail and finishing it off. “But who am I to complain?”

“Another?” Cadence asks, and he grins as he holds out the empty glass. She takes it and bounds back over to the bar.

Leaning against Val’s arm to look at them, Lori smirks.

“Regret walking over here yet?”
“We got free drinks, so I think we’ll manage,” Dean tells her with a laugh.

“So, what brought you here?” Cadence asks when she comes back, resting her chin on her hand as she leans on the side of her seat.

“We, uh,” Dean licks his lower lip. “Just needed some time to relax, ‘cause—”

“We’re getting married,” Cas cuts in.

“Ooh, congratulations!” Priya says, clapping her hands. “When’s the wedding?”

With a glance at Cas, Dean realizes that the specific details of their fictional wedding were something they didn’t go over at all. The backstory—how they met, what they do, where they live, how Dean proposed—all that crap was plotted out thoroughly by Charlie, who seemed to have far too good a time coming up with ways for Dean to have embarrassed himself. The actual wedding though? Somehow that part had slipped their minds.

He decides to just wing it and hope they both remember what he says in case someone brings it up again.

“September,” he blurts out.

“Beginning or end?”

“The middle,” he says, apparently incapable of choosing one of the options presented to him and making the whole act more complicated.

“I’d love a Fall wedding,” Lori sighs, leaning her head against Val’s shoulder. “Where are you having the ceremony?”

“Just at home,” Dean says.

“In Kansas,” Cas pipes up, oblivious as ever as he attempts to help, and Dean wills him to keep his mouth shut.

“I thought there was still a ban on same-sex marriage in Kansas,” Val says with a confused frown, and Dean nods, putting his arm around Cas’ shoulders and giving him a not remotely subtle squeeze.

“Oh-huh, yeah, there is,” he says.

Lori and Val send them matching sad looks that make Dean feel guilty as hell, and he clears his throat.

“But, y’know. It’s where we live, so we figured, fuck ‘em. Doesn’t need to be legal if it’s just, y’know… for us. And how we, uh… feel. About each other.”

Jesus, he thinks as he feels his face growing hotter by the second, and takes a large gulp of his drink as Priya makes an ‘aww’ sound at him. It sounds slightly patronising, whether she realizes it or not. Dean tries not to be irritated by it.

“Still, it’d be nice if it was legit,” Lori says with an understanding frown.

“Yes, it would,” Cas says.

Dean feels his throat close up at how sincere Cas sounds. They haven’t even been here a day and
already he’s wondering how he’s going to survive this without his heart actually deflating in his chest like a week-old balloon.

Desperate to get the conversation focused on literally anything else, he looks around the circle.

“So, how about the rest of you? You said you’d all been here a few days already?”

As the others talk they learn that Val and Lori have been coming here every summer for three years, Priya and Brian are taking their first couple-only vacation since the birth of their child--an adorably chubby little girl named Anika, who they both miss terribly--and that Cadence and Adrian have only been together for a month.

“We went to a trivia night together on our third date, and a week here was the prize,” Cadence explains.

“A week here and a bottomless bar tab,” Adrian says with a grin.

“How have they not noticed you keeping half the island hydrated?” Dean wonders aloud, and Adrian laughs.

“We haven’t been,” he says, tapping his nose. “But all six of us are leaving tomorrow, so we figured that if we were going to abuse it we should do it tonight. No boats off the island until tomorrow afternoon, so even if they decide to kick us out of the resort we’d be leaving at the same time.”

In a way that almost manages to look casual, Cas lifts his right hand to where Dean’s is still draped over his shoulder, tapping the back of his knuckles to get his attention. Dean bumps him with his knee in response. He knows exactly what Cas is telling him.

Based on the time-frame of their stay, they must have been here on Saturday. They might have seen something.

“It’s a flawless plan,” Cadence says, lifting her glass and clinking it against Adrian’s. The others laugh, joining in an impromptu toast. Once they’ve all lowered their glasses, Dean leans forward, dropping his voice as he dives right in.

“So I guess you guys were here when that couple went missing last weekend?”

“You heard about that?” Val asks.

Dean nods.

“Oh my god,” Cadence says, visibly perking up at the opportunity to tell a story even as she shifts her expression into something passably sombre. “They were the cutest couple.”

“We met them at the music workshop on Friday,” Priya says, and Cadence nods.

“They’re both super talented, and Lauren is an amazing artist, too. She showed me her sketchbook and it was just full of all these gorgeous drawings of Andre. And-- tell them, Adrian.”

Adrian pushes his hair back from his face and opens his mouth.

“Andre was going to propose,” Cadence blurts out before Adrian gets to speak. “We’re pretty sure. I mean, he didn’t tell anyone, but Adrian saw him with the ring box.”
Her face falls.

“Obviously he didn’t get to, though,” she says, looking down at her drink. “I hope they’re okay.”

“So you didn’t see what happened to them?”

Cadence and Adrian both shake their heads.

“We got room service Saturday night,” Cadence says with a sad frown.

“We didn’t even know they were missing until the police turned up,” Lori says.

“There was a rumor going around that he went out into the lake and Lauren tried to save him,” Adrian says.

“You don’t believe it, though,” Cas guesses, and Adrian huffs as he shakes his head. “Why not?”

“First time we spoke to them was Thursday night,” he says, pushing a loose strand of hair back from his forehead in a way that reminds Dean of Sam. “Down at the pool. They were doing laps.”

“They said they’d just finished in second place in some triathlon down in Austin the week before, and they were stuck in training mode,” Cadence says. “This vacation was meant to be like their reward for sticking with it.”

Dean can’t help but agree with Adrian’s assessment of the rumor; if this were the ocean or a river, or anywhere with a strong tide, he might have some doubt. But the likelihood of two physically fit people who swam regularly drowning in calm water—especially when they had no reason to be swimming in the lake at the time—seems pretty damn low.

“Well, here’s hoping they turn up,” Dean says, and the couples around the circle murmur their agreement, the mood far more melancholy than it had been a few minutes ago.

The sound of more people approaching makes Dean look up, and he’s surprised to realize that the restaurant is open. How it got to be seven o’clock he has no idea.

As soon as he’s realized that actual food is now an option his stomach rumbles.

“Hungry?” Cas asks, looking at him hopefully, and Dean nods as he slides his arm back out from where he’s had it draped around Cas’ shoulders.

“You go ahead,” Val tells them when Dean looks around the group. “We’ve all planned on a late dinner.”

“Have fun,” Dean tells them.

“Thank you for the drinks,” Cas adds.

“You’re welcome!” Cadence says, and hugs them with all the enthusiasm of a happy drunk before they can dodge her. “I hope you have an amazing wedding.”

Neither of them really know what to say to that, so after another round of thanks they head inside.

Bon Vivant is possibly the nicest restaurant Dean has ever set foot in, and he immediately feels out of place in his plaid shirt and jeans. The back wall is made up almost entirely of a wide, curved window that looks over the water and the wooded hills beyond, and every white-clothed table is set with expensive-looking silverware and crystal glasses.
The line to be seated is short, seeing as the restaurant only just opened, but Cas is still standing so close that Dean would be touching him if he took a deep enough breath. It’s probably just for the act, but… well. It’s not that much closer than he usually stands. Dean tries not to think about it.

“You were pretty good out there,” he says when the couple ahead of them is taken to their table, and from the corner of his eye he notices Cas’ mouth lifting into a pleased little smile. “Your, uh… people skills are really improving.”

“Thank you, Dean,” Cas tells him.

“So, are you doing okay?” Dean asks once they’ve been seated at a table by the window, and Cas tilts his head as though he’s still an angel and Dean has just said something confusingly human. “I mean, with the whole… act. You’re still good?”

“Of course,” he says, squinting. “Aside from the story, all you did was put your arm around me. You’ve done that before.”

“Right,” Dean says, not bothering to mention that this was a different kind of arm around the shoulder, mainly for fear that it really wasn’t.

Apparently satisfied with Dean’s monosyllabic response, Cas downs the last of his drink before sucking a stray drop of it from his thumb. His tongue darts out in the process, and despite the fact that he’s trying not to pay such close attention to the state of Cas’ mouth, Dean can’t help but laugh.

“What’s funny?”

“Your tongue is blue,” Dean says.

Cas pokes out his tongue, turning his head like he’s trying to see it, and Dean laughs at him again.

“Here, look,” he says, and pokes his own out briefly.

Cas widens his eyes and grins.

“And that’s why you should steer clear of cocktails,” Dean says with another laugh.

“I see,” Cas says, but when the waiter arrives to take their orders Cas scans the list and orders an Amaretto Jack, and Dean blinks at him for a moment before figuring, what the hell.

“Y’know what, I’ll have a piña colada,” he says without even looking at the menu.

Cas lifts his brow, clearly wondering what made Dean change his tune, and Dean shrugs as the waiter leaves.

“I’m not trying to impress anyone, so screw it. They taste good.”

Squinting, Cas puts down his menu.

“Are you saying that if we were somewhere else, and you wanted a piña colada, you wouldn’t get one because some hypothetical person might judge you for it?”

It sounds ridiculous when Cas says it like that. Dean thumbs his own menu awkwardly.

“Probably,” he admits.
“Does that happen often?”

Dean just shrugs again.

“That’s absurd, Dean.”

“Yeah, well,” he clears his throat and looks for a new topic. “I’m thinking steak. How about you?”

The look on Cas’ face tells Dean that his effort to change the subject was ham-fisted at best, but he follows Dean’s lead anyway. Dean doesn’t think he could possibly know how much he appreciates it.

Thankfully, once they’ve received their drinks and ordered their food, Cas turns the conversation back to the case.

“If the storm holds off long enough, I think we should try and check the rest of the island for EMF tonight.”

“Is this just so we don’t have to get up early?”

“Perhaps,” Cas admits with a sheepish smile.

Dean laughs, glancing out the window toward the western sky. Though the sun isn’t due to set for a couple more hours, the horizon is already growing dark, and he doesn’t like their chances.

Cas frowns when he says as much.

“We’ve only got the area around the restaurant, the beaches, and the amphitheater left,” Cas argues, looking out at the gathering clouds.

“Here’s hoping the weather holds, then,” Dean says, and then, just to be a pain, he adds; “But we’re getting up early tomorrow, either way.”

“Why?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Cas narrows his eyes.

“I don’t like surprises,” he claims.

“How would you even know that?”

“How would I not?” he counters. “Do I need to remind you how old I am?”

Dean’s about to reply when he hears a low chuckle from beside him, and turns to see the older woman from the lagoon bar taking a seat opposite her husband at the next table. There’s a twinkle in her eye that reminds Dean of Ellen when she’d make fun of him.

“You don’t look all that old to me,” she tells Cas.

“He’s had a lot of work done,” Dean says before Cas can reply, and the woman laughs again, her husband joining in. Dean grins when he sees Cas’ bemused expression and nudges his foot under the table.

“May I ask,” Cas says, ignoring Dean and turning in his seat to face the couple. “How long have
you been together?"

“Forty-six years,” the man replies, just as the woman says, “Forty years.”

They both look at each other and laugh.

“Edith and I first met forty-six years ago,” the man amends.

“But Ray didn’t get the nerve to ask me out for four years, and then we went steady for two more before we married,” Edith says, beaming as she reaches across the table to touch his hand. “It’s actually our anniversary today.”

“Hey, congratulations,” Dean says.

“I can only hope we’ll be as happy as you are after such a long time,” Cas tells them with such believable sincerity that Dean’s breath catches. “Excuse me a moment.”

Dean looks at him with a frown, and Cas gestures toward the bathroom before he leaves the table. Dean watches him go with a lump in his throat.

“You’ve got yourself a fine young man, there,” Edith tells him, and Dean looks over at her with what he hopes is a convincing smile.

“Yeah, Cas is somethin’ else,” he says. “So, uh... how long have you been here on the island? Anything we should check out while we’re here?”

“We’ve been here since Sunday,” Ray says, and Dean glances at Edith, who’s rummaging through her purse. After a moment, she comes up with a little digital camera, which she switches on.

“Now, where is that--ah! Here,” she turns it around and holds it out for him to see a photo of two paintings leaning side-by-side against a cabins porch railing. One shows a pair of hands holding a bunch of lavender; the other shows the silhouette of a man, standing on the edge of a field of wheat in a pair of coveralls.

“That one on the right is my handiwork,” she says, scrunching her nose as she indicates the wheat field. “I used to have such a good hand, but that’s how it goes--hush, Raymond, you know it’s true,” Edith looks over her glasses at Dean. “Ray did a beautiful job, though, don’t you think?”

“You both did,” he says, handing the camera back. “So the art class is a must?”

They both nod emphatically.

“Those will be going up on the wall when we get home.”

“And to think we almost didn’t come,” Edith says, smiling warmly and gripping her husband’s hand over the table.

“Why’s that?” Dean asks, and she frowns a little, clearly hesitant before she glances around and lowers her voice.

“A couple went missing on Saturday,” she tells him. “Just up and--”

She clicks her fingers, leaning back in her chair.

“Oh, we heard about that,” Dean says.
“Our daughter didn’t want us to come after it happened, in case it was a kidnapping. But I told her- didn’t I Raymond?”

“She did,” Ray nods.

“I told her, there’s nobody fool enough to try something like that two weeks in a row.”

“But enough of that,” Ray says. “Are you two here for a special occasion?”

For the second time today, Dean launches into the cover story and wishes he were here with Charlie. Pretending to be in love with Charlie would have been easier than this. Pretending to be in love with pretty much anyone would have been easier than this.

As it is, he’s starting to feel like he’s on the verge of a panic attack at all times.

“So when’s the big day?” Edith asks him just as Cas returns to the table. “I’d like to include you both in my prayers that day, if that’s alright with you.”

“Oh, sure,” Dean says, trying to remember what he told the others. Middle of September, he’d said. “It’s the twentieth. September twentieth.”

Cas pulls out his chair as Dean says it, and a strange expression flickers over his face before he smiles and looks down at the table.

Their meals are delivered, then, effectively ending the conversation with Edith and Ray, and as Dean eats his steak he tries not to let himself overthink what that look was about.

It’s as he’s swiping his last roasted baby potato through the leftover sauce that it finally clicks into place. September twentieth. That’s the--fuck.

That’s the day he and Bobby summoned Cas to the barn in Illinois.

The first time Cas turned up in the shape of Jimmy Novak.

The first time Dean saw him outside of Hell.

It’s basically their goddamn anniversary, and Cas obviously remembers because despite being mortal now he’s still got lingering traces of his steel-trap angelic memory.

The patter of rain starts up as Dean tries to convince himself that this isn’t a big deal, droplets hitting the window as a sharp gust of wind blows it sideways. He’s glad for the distraction it offers, and looks down at the beach below, where a woman with striking red hair is walking along the edge of the choppy water. Mist whips up from the surface with every gust of wind as the storm starts rolling in for real.

So much for getting the last EMF readings tonight.

“Who’d want to be out in that?” he asks, nodding out the window as their waiter returns to clear their plates, and Cas looks out with a sigh.

“No-one sensible. We should have eaten faster.”

“Looks like we’ll be getting up extra early, after all.”

Cas narrows his eyes at him over the table.
“How early?”

“How early,” Dean smirks into his glass. “But hey, at least this means we don’t have to hurry out tonight. I saw pie on that menu.”

Not even the promise of dessert is enough to distract Cas from the thought of being awake before dawn, and he pouts in a way that would look too childish on a teenager, let alone someone who—depending on how you look at it—is either as old as time or pushing forty.

Dean’s still trying to decide between two kinds of pie when the lights in the restaurant dim, and a procession of three waiters emerges from the kitchen, two of them carefully pushing a cart, on top of which sits a cake with sparklers flaring from the top.

Edith looks sharply between the cake and her husband as it nears, and Dean hears a quiet Raymond, you didn’t—before the waiters come to a stop right beside them.

From here, Dean can make out the words Happy Anniversary written in white frosting. It’s not until he feels Cas’ foot nudge his under the table that he realizes he’s got a sappy smile on his face, but when he turns to meet Cas’ eye he finds a matching one. Cas tilts his head to the side, as though he’s puzzling out another piece of Dean that he’s never seen before. Dean lifts one shoulder in a shrug.

“They seem really happy,” he says in explanation.

“Yes,” Cas agrees. “They do.”

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Cas is soaked to the bone by the time they get back to the cabin, the golf cart’s tiny roof doing little to protect him from the driving rain.

His hair is plastered to his forehead, his face splotchy and pink from the wind. He’s trembling. Dean takes one look at him and pushes him in the direction of the bathroom. Or technically, the bedroom that the bathroom is attached to, but he’s trying not to acknowledge that the bedroom exists until he absolutely has to.

“Go on,” he says when Cas looks back at him over his shoulder. “Take a shower and warm up.”

“You don’t want one first?”

“I’m fine,” Dean tells him with a wave of his hand as he walks past and grabs one of the towels from where it’s folded on the end of the bed. He scrubs at his own hair with it, which is only a little damp thanks to the angle of the rain. “You, on the other hand, look like something that just got dragged out of the lake.”

“Thanks,” Cas says, pulling a face, and Dean grins before picking up the other towel and throwing it at him. It hits him square in the chest and falls to the floor.

“Dude,” Dean says.

Cas just steps over the towel and goes to his bag, digging around until he’s found what he’s looking for. Dean pointedly doesn’t look at his ass, instead focusing on what they’ve managed to find out so far for the case.

It’s a short list that deals mainly in absences; no EMF, no hex bags, no sulfur, no ideas. Thankfully,
Cas disappears into the bathroom before Dean needs to come up with a new train of thought, and he lets the forced smile fall from his face.

At least Cas is too oblivious to recognize Dean’s struggle.

Sighing, Dean scrubs once more at his hair--now mostly dry--and drapes his towel over the chair by the wall before stripping out of his clothes and shimmying into a pair of track pants and an old t-shirt.

Outside, the rain comes a little heavier, drumming against the windows. It’s almost loud enough to drown out the low roll of thunder that comes right on top of the lightning. Storm must be right overhead, Dean thinks, stepping right up to the balcony door for a better view.

The lake reflects every flash, and Dean watches until he hears the clunk of Cas knocking something over in the shower.

“Crapdammit,” he hears Cas mutter through the door, and Dean’s mouth ticks up at the curse word combination that’s only marginally better than assbutt.

Glancing over his shoulder toward the bathroom door, Dean’s eyes fall on the bed. His smile fades. He’d be lying if he said that the sleeping arrangements hadn’t occurred to him until now, but though he’s been aware of it as an inevitable hurdle to jump, he’s been focusing on other things.

Now, though, it’s nearing ten o’clock, and they’ve both been awake for most of the past thirty-six hours. The drive from Kansas to Oregon wasn’t a short one, and though Dean did manage to sneak in a couple of hours sleep while Cas was driving it wasn’t exactly restful.

He’s already changed into what passes for pajamas in his world, and Cas is likely to have done the same when he comes back out. He’d probably have no problem sharing, a treacherous little voice in the back of Dean’s mind points out, and he stubbornly ignores it. He knows Cas would share the bed without question. And he also knows that he would have easily shared with Charlie unless she’d asked not to.

Dean’s still contemplating just how much of a problem it would be to share when Cas finally steps out in his boxers and a t-shirt, and that makes Dean’s decision for him. Dean can see his knees. The guy is practically naked.

Dean rubs at the back of his neck.

“So, uh,” he glances at the bed again. “I’m pretty beat.”

“It’s been a long day,” Cas agrees, rounding the bed to drop his old clothes into a pile by his bag.

“Rock-paper-scissors?”

Turning to look at Dean, Cas tilts his head quizzically.

“What?”

“For the bed,” Dean says.

Cas frowns and half opens his mouth as if he’s going to bring up one of the many reasons why it would be perfectly reasonable to share, and Dean feels like his legs might give out. But then he clicks his mouth shut and nods, and his easy acceptance really isn’t much better. Dean feels like
shit about it either way.

Cas’ paper wraps around Dean’s rock, just as Dean knew it would, and Cas gives him a reproachful look as though he knows what just happened. Dean’s not apologizing, though. He only deviated from scissors because he knew Cas would try to throw the game like the martyr he is. Pot, meet kettle, that same little voice in the back of his head pipes up.

“Best of three?” Cas suggests, and Dean shakes his head as he grabs one of the pillows.

“Nah, you won fair and square.”

Still, Cas looks a little guilty as he pulls back the covers.

“Is there another blanket?” he asks, glancing around. “You can have this one if—”

“I saw one in the top drawer,” Dean tells him, and pulls it open in illustration. He takes the beige blanket and shakes it out. “Night, Cas.”

“Goodnight, Dean,” Cas tells him, sliding under the covers, and Dean hits the light on his way out, trying not to notice how Cas sticks to the left side of the mattress. How welcoming that empty space to his right looks.

The love seat was not made for sleeping, and after almost an hour of trying (and failing) to get comfortable, Dean pushes the coffee table forward and drags his pillow and blanket down onto the ground. At least the rug is plush. With the rain still heavy on the roof, he manages to drift to sleep.

At half-past two the sound of Cas tripping over something and swearing under his breath startles Dean awake. He blinks as he sees the bathroom light flicker on for a moment before the door closes. Cas emerges again after only a few seconds, and Dean listens to him huff and sigh and fights his nagging desire to ask him if he needs something. Anything.

Whatever it is, Dean’s pretty sure he’s too tired to pretend he’d be unwilling to give it. He trips into sleep with that thought still pressing in on him, and as a result his dreams are a fractured and disjointed onslaught of feeling; aching and longing and rolling guilt, all underscored by the ongoing storm.

Eventually it passes, as do the dreams. His sleep is still uneasy, and it’s still dark out when his alarm goes off. His back is killing him from sleeping on the floor. He groans as he presses the button to silence his phone.

Cas is still sleeping when Dean shuffles past, sprawled out like a starfish on the bed, though he stirs, mumbling when Dean flicks on the bathroom light. By the time Dean opens the door again, he’s looking at the time with one eye half closed.

Lowering his phone, he frowns at Dean.

“It’s half past four in the morning,” he says.

“Yup.”

“Why is it half past four in the morning?”

“Well,” Dean says around his toothbrush, flipping the room’s main light on and earning a displeased grunt from what is suddenly a lump under the blankets on the bed. “Generally what happens is it gets to be four in the morning, and then the minutes keep piling on one-by-one until
“Stop talking,” Cas says.

Dean grins and heads back into the bathroom to rinse his mouth.

“The sooner you get up, the sooner we can finish checking for EMF,” he says as he walks back out, sitting down to pull some socks on and prodding what he hopes is Cas’ stomach through the blankets so he doesn’t go back to sleep. “And then we’ve got the rest of the day to be tourists.”

The blanket is shoved down a little, and Cas glares up at him.

“You’ll be a very lonely tourist,” he says.

“Why?”

“Because as soon as we’ve finished, I’m going back to sleep.”

Dean rolls his eyes and heads out of the room, making a beeline for little coffee machine in the kitchenette. As soon as Cas hears it whirring, there’s the shuffling of sheets and the click of the bathroom door. Dean smirks as he waits for the first cup to fill.

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Leaving the golf cart at their cabin, they make their way downhill, EMF meter turned on and scanning the whole way. It doesn’t make a peep, and they’re both too tired for conversation. It’s only after they’ve scanned all the buildings of main street that Cas speaks.

“I’ve been thinking,” he starts, and doesn’t continue until Dean lets out a questioning "hmm?"

“Should we practice?”

Dean looks over at him, still half-listening to the static of the EMF meter.

“Practice what?”

Cas gestures between them, and Dean lifts his brow as they come to a stop at the path beside Bon Vivant.

“Practice being a couple? How do you mean?”

For a long moment, Cas just looks at him. During the pause Dean manages to convince himself that Cas is going to ask him to teach him how to kiss. As if his life is some kind of cheesy rom-com instead of an Evil Dead/Blair Witch mashup.

“I don’t know exactly,” Cas finally admits. “I don’t know how to be in a relationship. I’m just worried that my inexperience will make us seem suspicious.”

“We already talked about this,” Dean reaches out to grasp his hand, just because he can. He holds it up as an example. “Hand-holding, arms around shoulders--”

“Those are physical things,” Cas says.

“Yeah?”

“Those aren’t the problem. I don’t know how to act when we aren’t doing those things.”
Considering, Dean stares down at their joined hands.

“I’m not exactly an expert,” he says.

“You still have a better idea than me. How do you act in a relationship?”

“Just... I don’t know, Cas. You seriously want to know?”

Cas simply nods.

“Well, for me, I guess... I’ll look at them when they aren’t looking.”

“To make sure they’re okay?”

“Yeah,” Dean allows. “But also just because I like to see them.”

“What else?”

“Try to make them laugh. Make them feel good. I, um...” Belatedly, Dean realizes he’s been talking in their’s instead of her’s, and he wonders if Cas has noticed. If Cas would say anything even if he had. If he’d even care. Dean decides it doesn’t matter. He clears his throat and continues. “If I see something they like when they’re not around, it’ll make me think of them, and that puts me in a good mood. Stuff like that, y’know?”

Thoughtful, Cas nods. He squeezes Dean’s hand before he lets it go.

“That helps,” he says. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

They start moving again, heading down the path to the right of the restaurant. It brings them to the beach-side amphitheater, and Cas pauses in a pool of lamplight by the bulletin board at its entrance, yawning as he reads.

“There’s a music workshop here this afternoon,” he says, and Dean looks back at him as he makes his way down the stairs.

“Yeah?”

“Join Raya and Alton for a two hour session. Beginners encouraged, instruments supplied,” he turns to Dean. “You used to play guitar, didn’t you?”

“When did I tell you that?”

“You didn’t. Sam told me.”

“Huh.”

There’s a pen attached to the board with a long chain, and Cas takes hold of it, looking at Dean.

“Do you want to do it?”

“Do you?” Dean asks him. Cas lifts his shoulder.

“Music interests me.”

Dean raises his brow, tempted to point out Cas’ repeated attempts to turn off the radio in the
Impala despite knowing about Dean’s rule.

“And we can ask the instructors about Andre and Lauren while we’re there,” Cas goes on before Dean can mention it. “Priya did say that they participated in the workshop.”

Chewing his lip, Dean looks from Cas to the flyer, noting that Cas conveniently left out the workshop’s name--Serenade Your Sweetheart--when he read it out loud. He fights the urge to make a sarcastic comment.

“Young, alright,” he says after a moment. “Could be fun.”

With a gummy smile, Cas prints their names and cabin number carefully on the sign-up sheet before nodding toward the beach.

“You think we’ll find anything down there?”

“Not really,” Dean admits.

With a hum of agreement, Cas stuffs his hands into his pockets and heads down the path.

“Then let’s get it over with,” he says, glancing back at Dean.

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The beach is quiet.

Pebbles clack and clatter under their feet as they walk, and though Dean listens for any fluctuation at all the EMF meter doesn’t register a single change.

The misty rain catches in Cas’ dark hair, making the cowlick over his ear curl. Dean finds himself staring at it as they walk. He’s so zoned out that he almost walks right into Cas, who abruptly stops and turns around.

“What?” Dean says, yanking his earbud out. “You see something?”

“I knew you weren’t paying attention.”

Cas is frowning at him. Dean tries to take the expression seriously, but that damn curl over his ear is still distracting and adorable, and now that Cas is a little closer it’s taking a whole lot of self control not to try to smooth it out with his fingers.

I could probably get away with it, he thinks. Could just say I’m getting in character.

“I’m busy listening to the complete lack of EMF,” Dean tells him, wriggling the meter in the air between them and stubbornly ignoring his reckless impulses. Cas rolls his eyes.

“I was just saying, it might pay to socialize more with the other guests. I spoke with a man outside the restroom last night who said he and his wife played tennis with Andre and Lauren before they disappeared, and that Lucy—that’s his wife—heard them have an argument about something.”

Dean lifts his brow.

“Why didn’t you mention it?”

Cas shrugs like he doesn’t know, but even in the scant light Dean can see his cheeks color. He can’t think of a good reason to ask why.
“You were talking to Edith and Ray when I got back. It slipped my mind.”

“Mm,” Dean says, and slips the earbud back into his ear. “Did this guy--what was his name?”

“Pete,” Cas tells him, turning to start walking again.

“Did Pete hear what they were arguing about?”

“He didn’t say. I got the impression he had more to say on the topic, though.”

“We’ll keep an eye out for him today, then, I guess.”

Cas nods, tucking his hands into the pockets of his jacket and picking up his pace a little.

They’re almost at the section of beach behind their cabin when there’s movement in the trees, and they both pause for a split second before deciding it’s not a threat; just a guy in loose hippie pants doing yoga stretches in the drizzling rain as he gazes out into the water. Following his line of sight, Dean sees the same woman who had been on the beach last night standing at the lake’s edge. The water just barely comes up to her calves, and she’s got her hands outstretched, face tilted up toward the still-drizzling sky.

Dean can’t feel a breeze, but her hair seems to float around her head anyway, dancing like flame. It’s such a vibrant shade of red it’s practically glowing. Dean stares at her for a moment, blinks, and jogs to catch up with Cas.

By the time the rain eases off, the sun is up and they’ve followed the waterline from the beach behind Bon Vivant all the way back their cabin without so much as a hint of EMF activity.

“Looks like we can rule out a spirit being involved.”

Dean winds the headphone cord around it before switching it off, and Cas nods as he yawns widely, looking out over the water. It’s smooth as glass, now, reflecting the last of the dawn, and on the other side a deer steps slowly out of the trees, cautiously edging toward the water where she bows her head to drink.

“Would you look at that,” Dean says, sticking his hands into his pockets as they stand and watch the deer.

“This place really is beautiful. I can see why people choose to bring their lovers here.”

“Yeah,” Dean replies, for lack of knowing what else he can possibly say to that, and with his hands still tucked in his pockets he thumbs at the meaningless band of silver on his ring finger. “You still planning on going back to sleep?”

Glancing back the way they’d come, Cas chews on the inside of his cheek before sighing.

“I’m too awake now,” he admits.

“Figured you might be,” Dean says.

Cas hums.

“You want to walk back for breakfast?” Dean suggests, looking back down the beach. “If we take our time it should be open by the time we get there.”

With another yawn, Cas agrees, and they slowly pick their way back along the pebbled beach.
Halfway there, the same guy from before has apparently finished his stretches, and as they grow nearer a second man in a Mariners jersey makes his way out from the trees behind him. He says something that makes the first one laugh before he wraps him in a hug and kisses his bare shoulder.

Dean frowns and looks back out toward the water. The woman isn't there.

“What are you looking at?” Cas asks him when he stops and turns on his heel to stare up and down the beach, and Dean shrugs a little.

“There was a woman when we were down here before. She was standing out at the edge of the water, just there.” He points toward the water line. “I figured she was with the yoga guy, but I guess not.”

“I didn’t see her.”

“You must have,” Dean says, stopping to look at him. “It was that woman who was on the beach last night, remember? Tall, flowy dress, kind of...”

“Kind of what?” Cas asks.

"Kind of glowy," Dean says dumbly, staring out. "Crap. You’re sure you didn't see her?"

“A glowing woman?” Cas lifts his brow. “No, I have a feeling I’d remember her.”

Dean shakes his head.

"I don't know why it didn't seem strange when I saw her.”

“You said you saw her last night, too?”

“You didn’t?”

Cas shakes his head.

"Maybe we could ask if they saw her?" he suggests, nodding toward the two men, and Dean shrugs. It’s worth a shot.

Maybe it’s because he’s still a little tired, or because he’s finally got an audience to give him a good reason to do it, but Dean slips his hand into Cas’ and leads the way. He tries not to notice the way Cas’ thumb moves over the side of his own as they go.

Yoga guy smiles at them as they approach.

“I was starting to think I was the only morning person on this island,” he says when they get close enough, and Dean offers a laugh.

“I know what you mean. Cas here has been whining about going back to bed ever since I woke him up.”

Cas pulls a face at him before turning to the others.

“Dean is neglecting to mention that he woke me at half past four. My distaste is justified.”

“Oof, that’s rough. As far as I’m concerned, if the sun isn’t up, it’s not morning,” Mariners jersey says, and sticks out his hand for Cas to shake before offering it to Dean. “I’m Miles, by the way.
The revolting early riser is my husband, Wade.”

“Condolences,” Cas tells him, and the couple both laugh. Dean just looks at Cas with a raised brow and a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Sarcasm isn’t exactly a new addition to Cas’ repertoire, but it’s rare that he uses it with any measure of success. Dean’s used to being the only one amused.

“I don’t think we’re the only ones up, though,” Dean adds when their laughter dies down. “There was that woman out in the water when we first came by.”

“Really?” Wade says, looking out across the lake with surprise, and Dean makes a mental note: he’s the only one who saw the woman. “It’s not exactly swimming weather.”

“But it’s perfectly acceptable for outdoor yoga,” Miles says with a raised brow, and Wade rolls his eyes as he lightly shoves at his shoulder.

“Exactly,” he says.

“I have to agree with Wade on this,” Cas says. “It’s always a good time for yoga.”

Dean’s brain screeches to a halt, and he looks over at Cas.

“Have you tried the couple’s yoga here yet?” Wade asks.

“We only arrived yesterday,” Cas tells him.

“It’s excellent,” Wade says. “Even Miles liked it, and he usually hates yoga as much as I hate baseball.”

Miles widens his eyes.

“Babe, if you keep telling strangers about your unnatural aversion to America’s pastime, we’ll never make any new friends,” he says in a mock-horrified whisper, and Dean grins.

“He’s right,” he tells Wade. “I’ve just made a mental mark against your name.”

“Damn,” Wade laughs. “Well if you can try and see past it, we’re having a cookout with a few other couples over at Applegate Point tonight, so long as the weather stays good. You guys interested?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean sees Cas tilting his head in consideration, and squeezes his hand. It’s a good idea. They were already thinking they should try socializing with the other guests, and a cookout takes some of the legwork out of trying to strike up conversations.

“Yeah,” he says with a smile. “We’ll be there.”
“They didn’t see her,” Cas says after Miles and Wade disappear through the trees, and Dean hums in agreement.

“That definitely puts a tick in the hinky column,” he says, tugging on Cas’ hand and resuming their slow walk back to the restaurant. “I’ll text Sam so they can add mysterious glowing woman to the research list.”

“Was there anything else noteworthy about her?”

“She was hot. In a scary kind of way.”

Cas pulls a face at him.

“You know,” Dean lifts his shoulder. “Like she could bust a door off the hinges without breaking a sweat. You telling me that isn’t hot?”

Cas starts to open his mouth, then glances away with a strange look on his face just in time for Dean to remember literally every time Cas has smashed his way into locked rooms.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Cas says. Dean just nods and sets his gaze on the stones on the ground.

It’s not until they arrive at Bon Vivant and Dean goes to open the door that he realizes they’re still holding hands. His palm is sweaty when he lets go, and he wipes it on his jeans as he fights the furious blush that’s threatening to overtake his face. Even his neck is warm.

He avoids Cas’ eyes as he walks inside.

Thankfully, the restaurant is still quiet, so they head straight for a table without waiting. It’s just barely seven o’clock, and Dean figures most of the sensible people are still curled up in bed. Dean envies them on every level imaginable. On the upside, their early arrival means first dibs on the breakfast buffet.

Dean fills two white mugs with French roast, leaving them at the table before heading toward the spread. He piles his plate high with hash browns and bacon, snagging a couple of sunny-side-up eggs on the way. He digs into them with relish while Cas waits at the omelet bar for something stuffed with spinach and mushrooms and cheese.

He’s halfway finished when Cas sits down, and when he eyes the omelet--it actually looks good--Cas cuts a third of it and slides it onto Dean’s plate.

“You don’t have to--” he starts, but then Cas takes one of his hash browns and bites into it before he can finish.

“Vegetables won’t kill you,” Cas says through his mouthful.

“What do you think hash browns are made from?” Dean snarks back, and the crinkles around Cas’ eyes grow a little deeper when he grins.

“I saw that same man from last night while I was waiting,” he says after a moment, popping another forkful of omelette into his mouth before gesturing toward another table by the window. “Perhaps we could go speak with him after breakfast.”
Dean looks where Cas is pointing and recognizes the couple as the ones they’d seen making out on the tennis court the day they arrived.

“Miles said we could bring whoever else to the cookout,” he says. “It might be worth inviting them. That way we can get everyone talking at the same time, and they might say more.”

Cas agrees with a smile, and they spend the rest of their meal in comfortable quiet. It’s been a pretty good morning, Dean decides as they fill out their lunch hamper order and thank the waitress for clearing the table. Naturally, it doesn’t last.

After waiting until they see that Pete and Lucy have finished eating, they make their way across the restaurant.

Pete is an artificially tanned yuppie in a pastel yellow Ralph Lauren polo, and he eyes them icily as soon as they near the table. Dean hears alarm bells going off in his head about three seconds before Cas opens his mouth. He squeezes his hand. Cas doesn’t seem to register his meaning.

“Good morning,” he says with his best friendly smile. “How--”

“We’re trying to eat,” Pete says, but his mouth is pulled tight, and the woman sitting opposite him doesn’t even look up from her obviously empty plate.

“Our mistake,” Dean says, cold through his painted on smile, and Pete’s expression shifts into something even uglier.

“Looks like it isn’t your first one,” Pete says, pointedly looking at their linked hands.

It takes more self control than Dean knew he had to keep from upending the asshole’s tomato juice over his head. Grinding his teeth together to keep from making a scene, Dean all but drags a bewildered Cas away from the table toward the door.

“What just happened?” Cas asks.

“Nineteen fifty-four,” Dean says, and leads Cas outside, letting the door swing shut behind them.

“What?”

“I’m guessing you didn’t mention me when you spoke to him last night.”

Cas narrows his eyes.

“Yes, I did.”

“But did you say my name, or--”

“He asked if I was here for a special occasion, and I told him our cover story.”

Dean lifts his brow, and Cas goes on.

“I said, my fiancé and I are taking some time to relax before our wedding.”

“Yeah,” Dean huffs and rolls his eyes, heading down the path toward the beach so they can return to the cabin. “I figured.”

“Did I say something wrong?”
“No,” Dean sighs, dropping his hand now that he has no good reason to keep holding it. “You did great, Cas.”

“Then what happened?”

“He didn’t realize that your fiancé was a dude, and when he did, his true douchebag form showed itself. He’s just a bigoted asshole, and his wife either agrees with him or doesn’t care enough to tell him off, which is basically the same thing. So screw ‘em. We’ll get intel elsewhere.”

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They’ve been back in the cabin for five minutes when Dean’s cell dings with a text from Sam, telling them to get on Skype. Dean’s barely got the laptop running when the group video call comes through.

“I’ve got a theory,” Sam says when Dean answers the call, and Dean can’t help himself.

“That it’s a demon?”

“What?” Sam asks, just as Charlie pops into view.

“A dancing demon?” she asks. He shakes his head.

“Nah, something isn’t right there.”

Sam looks at Charlie, then at Dean, pulling a face.

“Are you two done with... whatever that was?”

“Yup,” Charlie says, sitting down on the motel bed with a bounce. “Unless you want to discuss the bunny possibility.”

“I’m not even gonna ask,” Sam says.

“What’s your theory?” Cas asks, looking just as perplexed as Sam.

“Okay, so in Dad’s journal there’s this missing couples case he worked back in ’97 in Coeur d’Alene,” Sam starts, and Dean shakes his head. He knows the case Sam’s talking about, but he’s pretty sure it doesn’t fit.

“Those couples all went missing at the same time,” he says.

“Yeah, but when they turned up they were just like the Ortegas,” Sam says. “Practically mute and super cagey, but otherwise they were in perfect physical health.”

“They’d also stopped wanting to be anywhere near each other,” Dean points out. “I don’t remember seeing anything about that this time.”

“It wasn’t in the article,” Sam agrees. “But the sheriff I spoke to earlier said Isaac and Teresa seemed wary of each other while they were being questioned. It could be something.”

“What had happened to the couples in the old case?” Cas asks.

“A maenad,” Dean says. “She was hiding in plain sight. Everyone knew her as the owner of the only decent bar in town.”
“She’d been living in a cabin on the edge of the national forest with a whole harem of human lovers for years, but then almost all of them were killed in a wildfire while she was out. She went mad with grief. Started kidnapping couples to try and rebuild her harem.”

“But it didn’t work,” Dean explains, “the others had been there by choice, and she couldn’t force these new people to love her, so she let them go and started taking others to try again.” He sighs. “I guess it could fit…”

“We did see a deer by the lake this morning after you saw that woman,” Cas offers with a shrug. “They are associated with maenad.”

“They’re also associated with, y’know… the woods,” Dean says, and ignores Cas’ eye roll to look back at the screen.

“Well, I’ve been checking out the employee records,” Charlie says. “There are two women who have been working there long enough to have been around for both couples. There’s, um… Bellamy Glass, she’s the resident artist, and Avery Ahern, the activities coordinator.”

“We met Avery the day we arrived,” Cas says.

“I knew she was too peppy to be human,” Dean says, nudging him, and Cas huffs a laugh. “Any ideas on how we’re supposed to test either of them? We can’t exactly go in guns blazing.”

“There’s a spell,” Sam explains. “It’ll make a maenad… well. Black-out drunk, is the modern translation. She’ll be out for at least a day if it works, and by then we’ll be there with the things we need to restrain her and find out where she’s keeping Lauren and Andre.”

The spell is relatively simple, in the end; all they need is a bottle of wine, a few fennel seeds, and to have the suspected maenad in their sights when one of them drinks it. The seeds are the most difficult thing to come by, but Cas solves that by changing their lunch order to include a fennel and pomegranate chicken salad.

They prepare the spell as soon as their lunch hamper arrives, dropping fennel seeds into the opened bottle after Cas has rinsed them clean of vinaigrette in the bathroom sink. After that, it’s just a matter of taking the wine with them and repeating an incantation with each suspected maenad in sight.

They find Avery first, speaking with another staff member at the information desk. Dean holds the bottle ready as they stand half-hidden by a display rack loaded with pamphlets.

“Το κρασί είναι γλυκό μέσω θυητό χείλη,” Cas intones the Greek with ease, and Dean takes a sip. “πικρό διανυσιακή στο στόμα σας.”

With a glance at Avery, Dean waits for the woman to show some sign of intoxication, but nothing happens. He picks a fennel seed out of his tooth, and looks back up at Cas, who shrugs.

“I guess it’s not her,” Dean says.

Finding Bellamy Glass takes a little more work, considering she’s not scheduled to lead any art workshops on Thursdays, but with the help of her photo on the Ancora website they eventually catch sight of her through the trees that separate staff accommodation from the rest of the island. Crouched between the branches, Cas repeats the incantation, but they have the same lack of reaction that they’d seen with Avery.

Dean pushes back to his feet, knees popping with the motion.
“So much for that idea,” Dean says, and digs his phone from his pocket with his free hand. “I’ll let Sam know, and then I think we’ve well and truly earned lunch.”

Cas nods in agreement, and they make their way through the trees, eventually hitting the narrow road. A golf cart zips past, and Dean waves back when he recognizes Edith waving hello from the driver’s seat.

Arriving at their cabin, Cas slips his keycard from his pocket and swipes it through the reader on the door. It opens with a beep. He makes a beeline for the bar fridge, where they stored their lunch before heading out. He grabs the chicken salad, along with the roast beef sandwiches they’d both requested in the morning, and bypasses the table in the kitchenette for the loveseat.

Dean can’t find it in himself to complain about the seating arrangements.

Sitting down, he grabs his sandwich and digs in while Cas cracks open the lid of the salad, and pokes through it with the plastic fork as he opens the resort guide to read. They eat in silence, and Dean wonders how it hadn’t occurred to him until now that their cabin lacks a TV.

“Anything interesting in there?” he asks, gesturing toward the guide before leaning forward to pinch a bit of chicken from the container. Cas hums in reply.

“I don’t know if you noticed,” he says, turning to the next page as he licks mustard off his thumb. “But all of the activities here are focused specifically on nurturing intimacy in relationships.”

Dean lifts his brow.

“Yeah, well. It’s a couples retreat, Cas. Not exactly a shocker.”

“It’s nice,” Cas decides.

“I guess,” Dean agrees. “If you’re into that kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing?” Cas frowns.

“Y’know,” Dean waves his hand uselessly. “Couple shit.”

Cas squints, as though it will help him parse Dean’s meaning. Dean doesn’t like his chances, considering he’s not entirely sure what he’s getting at himself.

“There also seems to be a focus on the arts,” Cas goes on, looking back at the guide. “It says here that the resort’s original founders had backgrounds in art and sex therapy.”

“Uh-huh,” Dean says, and is glad to note that it’s close enough to three o’clock that he’s got a legitimate excuse to end this conversation before it takes a single step down the sex therapy path. “We’d better get moving, anyway. Music workshop starts soon.”

***

There are two instructors—Raya and Alton, if Dean’s remembering the flier right—waiting in the amphitheater when they arrive. Raya is the ScarJo lookalike they’d seen playing guitar outside the restaurant, and Alton is a tall Black man whose muscular arms make Dean wonder if he moonlights as a personal trainer. They’re talking to one another quietly until Alton says something that has Raya bursting out in a fit of delighted laughter, pushing lightly on his arm. Alton smiles at her.
Dean takes a seat on the third step from the bottom, and leans closer to Cas when he follows.

“Man, get a load of that guy. Is it just me, or are all the people who work here stupidly hot?”

Cas just lifts his brow, and Dean realizes that he’s already fallen so deeply into his role as an out-and-proud guy that he’s forgotten, on some level, that he doesn’t usually make those kinds of comments.

“Just, uh… in an objective, I have functioning eyeballs kind of way,” he adds.

The couple sitting in front of them both stifle laughter, obviously eavesdropping, but Cas just looks at the two instructors and replies before Dean can say anything else.

“You’re not wrong,” he says simply.

With a decisive nod, Dean looks away from Cas to take in the surroundings. There’s a wheeled stand down by the instructors, loaded with five guitars. He’s about to wonder aloud how this is going to work when Raya and Alton call for attention.

“How’s everyone doing this afternoon?” Alton asks, stepping forward to address the group, and the five couples make scattered replies.

“I’m sure you’re all eager to get started, so I’ll make introductions quick. My name’s Alton Marcus, and I’m a lyricist and music therapist. I’ll be working with half of you today as we write some lyrics for your partners, while my wife here works with the others. Raya?”

“Thanks, Al,” Raya beams, touching his arm briefly before addressing the group. “You’ve most likely seen me at Bon Vivant, where I play most nights. While Alton works his wonders with words, I’ll be teaching the rest of you to play a little something on guitar. Now, don’t worry if you’ve never played before. There are two different versions, and the simpler one was written specifically for beginners.”

“I’ll help to make sure the lyrics you’ll be writing will fit the melody of the song the others learn to play,” Alton adds. “And when you come back together, you’ll have something special to share with each other.”

“Best of all, after the session, the guitar is yours for the rest of the day,” Raya says.

“Just leave it in the alcove outside your cabin where your lunch hampers go,” Alton tells them, “and an Ancora staff member will collect it first thing in the morning.”

Raya claps her hands together.

“Alright, take a couple of minutes to decide who’s doing what, and then make your way down to us.”

There’s a murmur of conversation as the couples decide what they’d like to do, and Dean turns to Cas.

“Did you want to--”

“You take the guitar,” Cas tells him.

“You sure? You said you wanted to learn,” Dean says.

“If the song is as simple as they say, you can teach it to me later,” Cas points out.
“Okay,” Dean says, and immediately has to shut down his imagination when he pictures himself moving Cas’ hands over the fretboard to teach him basic chords. He pushes past the thought. “Thanks, buddy.”

They rise together, and Dean leaves his hand on Cas’ elbow as they make their way down the stairs, only letting go when they split off into the two groups. Dean grabs a guitar from the rack and takes a seat, slipping it from its soft cover.

It’s been years since he held a guitar, but as soon as he touches the fretboard it feels like yesterday. Still, holding the strings down is more difficult than he remembers. There’s an unpleasant buzz when he strums, and he presses them down a little harder. On his second attempt at an F, the sound is smooth and rich. He switches to D minor, then C, and looks up to find he’s got an audience.

Embarrassed, he stops strumming.

“Hey, you’re already good,” the girl on his left says with a grin, tucking a loose lock behind her ear as she looks up at her friend, who’s standing nearby, plucking out a vaguely familiar tune. “Hey, Lee—it looks like you’re not the only one who already knows how to play.”

At Lee’s exaggerated pout, the girl leans toward Dean to speak in a stage whisper. “Lee’s been showing off ever since they picked up the guitar,” she says.

“It’s not showing off, Tamara,” Lee says, wandering over to sit down on her other side. “It’s sharing my amazing gift.”

Tamara rolls her eyes. “I don’t know how my brother can stand that ego,” she says, but the words are delivered with a playful smile, and Lee just pokes their tongue out at her as they resume playing quietly.

“Well, don’t worry about me stealing your thunder,” Dean says. “I think I might remember how to play Wild Thing, but that’s about it.”

“If you can play Wild Thing, you can probably play Louie Louie,” Lee points out. “It’s basically the same song.”

“Good point,” Dean laughs. “I’ll add it to my repertoire.”

Lee taps the side of their nose.

“So you guys are in-laws, huh?” Dean asks, and Tamara nods. “Basically,” she says. “Though none of us are actually married. Lee’s been dating Jonah for… what, three years?”

“Three and a half,” Lee says, and points toward a man in the other group. “He’s the hot guy.”

Dean lifts his brow. “But the hot guy is my fiancé,” he says.

Tamara and Lee both laugh, and Dean grins at them as Raya calls for attention. The group quietens. Out of the corner of his eye, Dean sees the others being lead away from the amphitheater toward a few spread-out picnic tables in the trees.
“Now, before we get started,” Raya says, “give me a quick show of hands; who here has played guitar before?”

Dean hesitantly lifts his hand, glancing around to find that Lee is the only other person with their hand raised.

“A little,” Lee says.

“A little less, for me,” Dean tells her. “It’s been nearly twenty years since I played. I only remember a few chords.”

“In that case, I’ll start out with the simple version, and I’ll show you both the more complex one if you feel up to it. Sound good?”

Lee nods. Dean gives a thumbs up.

“Excellent,” Raya says, and picks up her own guitar from its stand, hooking the strap over her shoulders. “I’ll play the whole thing through, and then we’ll go over the chords. Deal?”

With that, she starts to play, and Dean watches her quick-moving hands with worry. How on earth she’s expecting to teach this song to a group of novices is beyond him.

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Despite Dean’s reservations, he can play the complete song by the end of the workshop, and he slides the guitar back into it’s case with a sense of pride he’s not used to.

“That was a hell of a lot more fun than I thought it would be,” Tamara says from beside him, and Dean can’t help but agree.

“I might have to look up some of those online lessons,” he says.

“There’s some pretty good ones out there,” Lee tells him. “That’s how I learned.”

Once they’re all packed up, Tamara and Lee are about to leave when Dean calls them back.

“Are you guys doing anything tonight?” he asks. “Just, Cas and I are going to this cookout—"

“Oh, you met Miles and Wade?” Tamara asks.

“Yeah,” Dean says.

“Then we’ll see you there,” Lee says with a friendly grin, and the two of them head off up the path to their waiting boyfriends. Dean scopes the area until he finds Cas still seated at a picnic table, head bent over a sheet of paper as he writes. He makes his way over.

“How’d it go?” he asks when he gets close, and Cas startles, head snapping up at the sound of Dean’s voice. He moves his arm to cover the paper, which only makes Dean want to see it even more.

“I attempted to ask about Lauren and Andre, but I couldn’t find a good opening,” he admits.

“Yeah, same,” Dean says. “I think I pissed off Raya with my questions.”

“I avoided that, at least,” Cas says with a grimace, and Dean hums. “Are you ready to go?”
“I can wait, if you’re still working on that,” Dean tells him. He doesn’t ask why Cas is still writing lyrics when Dean’s the only one who’s supposed to hear them. He’s afraid of the answer.

“No, that’s alright,” Cas says, and folds the paper in half before he stands, slipping it into his pocket.

Dean leads the way back up the hill to their cart. He pauses before climbing in, looking toward the general store.

“We should get stuff for the cookout,” he says, and when Cas nods, they make their way inside.

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They’ve been back in the cabin for an hour, puttering around and waiting to make their way down to the cookout, and Dean is yet to see what it was Cas wrote. It’s starting to bug him.

In an effort to stop himself from obsessing over it, he reads an article Kevin sent him about a lake monster that seems entirely unrelated to the case at hand. He reads the same sentence six times before he gives up drops his phone on the love seat. Behind him at the small kitchen table, Cas is back to writing on the creased slip of paper. Dean looks back at him.

“I’m gonna take a shower,” he says.

“Okay,” Cas replies without looking up, and Dean nods before heading into the bedroom. He spends another five minutes deciding what he’s going to wear before he finally takes his shower, and when he emerges, Cas is still writing.

Dean returns to the loveseat. He taps his toe on the rug until he can’t help but turn to look at Cas, who just keeps writing, oblivious.

“How’re you going with that novel you’re working on?” Dean asks him. “Got a big stack of papers, there?”

Cas looks up at him before looking back at the single page he’s working on.

“It’s just the one sheet,” he says. Dean just shakes his head.

“Never mind,” he says.

“Is it almost time to leave?”

“Yeah,” Dean agrees, getting to his feet. “We’d better get ready.”

On their way out, Dean pauses to put the guitar into the alcove by the door. He tries not to regret that he never got a chance to play the song for Cas, but the feeling is there regardless.

***

They hear the others before they see them, their laughter and conversation echoing through the trees at Applegate Point.

“Back into the fray,” Dean mutters, holding out his hand, and Cas smiles as he takes it, threading his fingers between Dean’s easily. The motion has already become a practiced one. Dean resolves to enjoy it while he can.

Dean sees Wade over by a picnic table, where he’s talking to Tamara and two girls they haven’t
met yet as they spread out hamburger buns and a few bags of potato chips. There’s a guitar case leaning against the table’s side, though it lacks the Ancora logo, and Dean wonders who it belongs to.

Miles is standing at the grill where he’s already got a few burgers cooking. Beside him, Jonah and a curly-haired man that Dean recognizes from the music workshop are deep in conversation. They all look over when Miles calls out to them, lifting his tongs in greeting.

“Dean, Cas, you made it!”

There’s a chorus of hellos, and as Dean replies, Cas gives a little wave with his free hand.

“You guys want a drink?” someone asks from off to the side, and Dean turns to see Lee digging through a cooler.

“I’ll trade you,” Dean says, holding up the six pack he’d picked up earlier, and Lee sticks them in the ice before rattling off the selection. Dean grabs a beer identical to the ones he brought; Cas accepts a cider with a grateful smile.

The curly-haired guy wanders over with a bottle opener before Dean has a chance to ask.

“Need some help, there?” he asks.

“Thanks,” Dean says, and the guy takes the bottles one at a time. “You’re Tamara’s boyfriend, right?”

“Carlos,” he says with a nod. “Tam said you were a quick study in the music workshop.”

“I did okay with the basic song,” Dean says, taking a mouthful. “Got nothin’ on Lee, though.”

“God, don’t encourage them.”

“Hey man, credit where credit’s due. I couldn’t even get past the intro of the complicated version.”

“I’ll be signing autographs later,” Lee says, taking a deep bow.

Carlos groans, though he’s clearly holding back laughter, and Lee pokes their tongue out at him before heading over to Jonah.

Before long, Miles announces that the burgers are done, and everyone takes a seat around the fire-pit to eat. Dean and Cas find themselves sitting between Tamara and Carlos on one side, and the two girls--Kat and Alexa--on the other.

Kat reminds Dean--bizarrely--of Frank Devereaux. Within five minutes of sitting down, she’s brought up three different conspiracy theories and bluntly insulted Dean twice. He’s not sure why, but something about the tiny woman calling him a jackass and punching his arm is weirdly endearing.

Alexa stays quiet, just watching Kat with a fond smile on her face as though she thinks ranting to a perfect stranger about chemtrails is adorable.

“Hey, babe?” she says when Kat finally takes a breath. “Can you pass me my--”

Kat hands over her out-of-reach drink before Alexa’s finished the question, and then she’s the one with the fond gaze.
Dean leans over to Cas.

“Remember what I said about looking when they’re not looking?” he asks quietly, and Cas smirks.

“I know. I saw Miles doing the same thing, earlier.”

“Yeah?” Dean asks. He aims for an air of casual intimacy as he slings his arm around Cas’ shoulders.

There’s only a brief pause before Cas leans against him, sliding his own hand over the small of Dean’s back to settle on his hip. He’s warm, and this close Dean can smell the sweet apple tang of the cider Cas has been drinking ever since Lee told him he was welcome to as many as he liked.

“That any good?” Dean asks, nodding toward the bottle, and Cas offers it to him in response. As Dean takes a sip, he tries not to think of it as kissing by proxy. It’s only after he’s already done it that he realizes his claim about not wanting to share silverware just lost all credibility. He’s relieved when Cas doesn’t comment.

“I think I prefer cider to whisky,” Cas tells him as he takes the bottle back and tilts it to his mouth. “It’s less harsh.”

“I keep forgetting you’re a lightweight, now.” He grins when Cas casts him a sideways glance. “What, you gonna argue?”

Cas only huffs and puts his drink down before leaning more heavily against his side, his head dipping until it’s resting on Dean’s shoulder. His hair tickles Dean’s neck.

Dean aches all over.

It’s strange, how quickly his mood can change. One moment, he’s enjoying the night, appreciating being close to Cas regardless of the circumstances that brought them here; the next, he feels like he wants to scream because it’s all wrong.

Whoever said that thing about having loved and lost is a moron, because Dean’s living both scenarios simultaneously, and he knows which one is worse.

He’d much rather never have known what it felt like to have Cas in his arms than have it now with the knowledge that it’s temporary.

He’s so focused on his own inward spiral that he doesn’t realize Carlos is talking about the Ortegas until Cas nudges him pointedly in the ribs.

“...but they looked like they’d been to a party.”

“You saw them?” Kat asks.

“Yeah,” Tamara pipes up from where she’s leaning against Carlos’ chest. “Looked like they came right out of the lake over by the restaurant, but I don’t think they swam from the shore.”

“Why’s that?”

“They didn’t seem out of breath or anything,” Tamara says with a shrug.

“Yeah, and their clothes were wet, but their hair wasn’t,” Carlos adds. “The lake’s not huge, but it’s a long way to swim without getting soaked.”
Kat shudders, but she’s doing a terrible job of looking less than excited by the idea of a mystery.

“I bet there’s some kind of, like… government compound or something in the national forest,” she says.

“Could be,” Alexa says, tone sombre. She cracks up when Kat shoves lightly at her shoulder. “You’re such a nerd.”

“And you love me, so who’s the bigger nerd, huh?” Kat points out.

Alexa rolls her eyes and leans in to kiss her.

The topic of the Ortegas is dropped, and though Dean asks if anyone knew Andre and Lauren, they don’t learn anything new. It’s just more of the same—cute couple, super in love.

Conversation shifts easily between the other couples after that, and Dean just lets himself listen. After a little while he grows used to the way he’s leaning against Cas, and goes back to letting himself enjoy it. He’s pretty sure that at least a little of his comfort is thanks to the drinks he’s had, but he’s not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. He’s content. Not exactly happy, not when he’s still aware that none of this is real, but he feels good.

He doesn’t notice he’s closed his eyes until Cas whispers in his ear.

“Do you want to go back to the cabin?”

His voice is soft and warm and close, and it does things to Dean. Makes his stomach flip and his skin tingle, and that’s reason enough to shake his head.

“Nah,” he says. “I’m awake.”

Cas huffs, his nose pressed to the hair behind Dean’s ear. When he speaks again, Dean can feel his lips moving.

“Your eyes are closed,” he says.

“Your eyes are closed,” Dean tells him, and cracks one eye open as he twists around to look at Cas. Cas just lifts one brow. The sight, just like the sound of his voice, makes Dean feel a whole damn lot of things he can’t afford.

Straightening up, Dean looks around to find that the group has thinned. Only Miles, Wade, Tamara and Carlos remain.

“When did everyone else leave?” Dean wonders aloud.

“I thought you were awake,” Cas replies.

A snort of laughter comes from beside them, and Dean looks over to see Wade looking through his cellphone.

“Cas, give me your number.”

Cas looks a little startled, but he does as he’s asked, and after a minute his phone buzzes in his pocket. When he takes it out, there’s a new video message. He looks at it warily before pressing play.
Dean leans back against him to watch.

It’s a video of Miles making a series of increasingly ugly faces while the camera shakes with Wade’s laughter, but it only takes a moment for Dean and Cas to find themselves in the background.

Dean’s first thought is that they’re doing a pretty good job of looking like a real couple. Cas looks a little stiff, but not so much that it’s weird. Mostly, they look comfortable. And more importantly; Dean is awake.

“See?” Dean says.

“Keep watching,” Wade laughs.

After maybe thirty seconds, Dean starts sinking sideways. He turns his face toward Cas’ chest, bringing one hand up to rest on his stomach, and Cas’ eyes go wide. He touches Dean’s shoulder lightly as he speaks. Dean nods, and for some reason the response makes Cas frown as he says something else.

When Dean doesn’t respond, Cas cranes his neck to look at his face, and smiles. His whole body relaxes visibly. The hand still resting on Dean’s shoulder comes up to touch Dean’s hair as Cas looks down at him with a gentle smile. The sight makes Dean’s heart skip.

The video ends.

“Recorded at 9:48 P.M.,” Wade announces, making Dean look back up. “Which was an hour ago.” Forcing a laugh, Dean shrugs.

“I guess I was tired. Any beers left?”

Without looking at Cas he pushes to his feet. He spends a lot longer than necessary choosing which of the four remaining (identical) beers to drink, and only turns toward the fire pit when he hears the strum of a guitar. Carlos is halfway through the first verse of Layla when Dean sits back down beside Cas. He hands him a beer, and Cas takes it, placing it on the ground at his side before shuffling over to pull Dean against him again.

“We looked convincing like this,” he murmurs quietly.

Dean swallows and nods.

“Yeah.”

They don’t speak again for a while; just sit together, listening to Carlos play through the song before Tamara asks him to play Diamonds on the Inside. Slowly, Dean lets himself relax back into Cas’s arms. This time, he makes sure not to fall asleep.

It’s close to midnight when Carlos plays his last song, and he’s about to put the guitar away when Tamara speaks.

“Wait, wait,” she says. “I want to hear Dean play Wild Thing.”

Dean laughs, and Cas’ arms squeeze him as he does.

“I think it’d be less playing and more butchering,” he says.
“C’mon,” she insists, nudging Carlos until he holds out the guitar.

“I did say it’d been twenty years since I played, right?”

“It’s like riding a bike,” Miles says with a shrug. “Probably.”

Dean only hesitates for a moment, but he regrets taking the guitar the second Cas moves away to give him room.

“This… I’m not a great singer, either.”

“Good thing we’re all a few drinks deep, then,” Carlos grins.

Dean starts playing, the simple song coming back to him easy as anything.

“Wild thing, you make my heart sing,” he begins, dropping his voice to something cheesy for the second line. “You make everything groovy!”

“Wild things!” Tamara calls out, and Dean laughs.

When he risks a glance to his side, Dean finds Cas smiling at him, and all at once he feels a little reckless. He holds his gaze.

“Wild thing, I think I love you,” he sings, and feels his stomach flip as the words tumble out, even though Cas has no idea that he means them. “But I wanna know for sure!”

Cas stares at him, and Dean gives him a grin, bumping Cas’ knee with his own.

“So come on and hold me tight,” the others all join in on the next line, and Cas jerks his head around to look at them for a moment, his expression wide eyed at the sudden chorus. “I love you!”

By the time the song is over, Cas is beaming. As Dean hands Carlos’ guitar back, Cas squeezes his shoulder. His lips brush Dean’s cheek as he leans in to speak, and it’s close enough to a kiss that Dean feels dizzy at the sensation.

“That was wonderful.”

He says it as though the song Dean just played was some beautiful ballad, not the basic four-chord affront to music that it was. Dean glances down at the ground and shrugs off the compliment.

“Only seems that way ‘cause we’re all half drunk.”

The others announce they’re leaving before Cas can try to argue with him, and Dean double checks that the fire is out before they follow.

Sam and Charlie aren’t due to arrive on the beach until one o’clock. It’s a nice night, though, so Dean suggests they walk down to the beach now.

By the time they see movement, they’ve been sitting side by side on the treeline for close to an hour.

It’s not the woman, though; it’s a small boat, zipping across the water.

The whine of the dinghy’s outboard motor cuts off when they’re about three quarters of the way across, and for what feels like forever Dean and Cas sit at the edge of the trees, watching Sam and Charlie slowly row closer. When the bottom of the boat finally drags against the stony shore, they
both stand, dusting leaves and dirt from their jeans before making their way down to meet them.

Charlie looks exhausted. She stretches her arms out and rolls her shoulders.

“I’m gonna need to start pumping iron if I’m gonna be doing any more hands-on hunting,” she says, clutching Sam’s shoulder for balance as she leans over the edge to hand Dean a bag full of weapons. “How’s things over here?”

“Overwhelmingly uneventful,” Cas says, but he slurs a little on the words, and Sam lifts his brow as he looks between them.

“You guys had a good night,” he guesses.

“Cas keeps forgetting he doesn’t have a holy liver.”

Cas frowns at him but doesn’t argue.

“So I’m guessing there’s no news on the glowing woman?” Sam asks.

“Nope,” Dean says, before remembering Tamara and Carlos’ comments. “There’s something though—apparently when the Ortegas turned up they weren’t out of breath or anything. So it looks less like they escaped from whatever had them, and more like it let them go.”

“Okay,” Sam says, and rubs his hands together for warmth. “That could help. Is there anything else?”

“Nope,” Dean adds. “The general consensus seems to be that Andre and Lauren were a ‘cute couple,’” Cas says. “There’s only one conflicting view, but the source of that is a…”

Cas appears to search for the right word. Dean finds it for him.

“An asshole,” he says. Cas nods decisively.

“An asshole,” he agrees.

Sam’s brow furrows as he cracks a little smile, and it’s an expression Dean’s noticed he makes, more often than not, whenever Cas has just done something particularly cute. Sometimes, he thinks Sam looks at Cas like he’s their kid brother, and he briefly wonders how awkward it would have been if he’d been the one who got paired with him on this hunt. The thought makes him pull a face.

“Okay,” Sam says after a moment. “I guess we’ll head back, then.”

“You heading to Salem tonight?”

Charlie nods.

“And I was thinking… if we finish up with the Ortegas soon enough, we should come back and check in here. We can do the rest of our research from the island.”

She casts her gaze along the beach.

“I’d been looking forward to checking this place out.”

“I knew you wanted to be my fake girlfriend,” Sam jokes, and Charlie snorts.
After a few minutes, Sam and Charlie start the slow row back.

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Cas heads right inside when they reach the cabin, yawning widely as he crosses the main room, but Dean falters at the door. The guitar is still sitting there in the alcove, waiting for collection, and after the way Cas smiled at him playing Wild Thing, he kind of wants to play the song he spent all afternoon learning.

“Hey Cas,” he says, drumming his fingers on the doorframe. “You ever gonna let me hear the lyrics you wrote?”

At his words, Cas comes to a stop, turning on the spot to look at him.

“I assumed you didn’t want to hear them,” he says.

“Well?”

“You never offered to play the song,” Cas says with a shrug that looks a little too casual for Dean to believe it, before gesturing toward the door where Dean’s still standing. “And you already put the guitar out in the alcove.”

“I only did that because I thought you didn’t want to—” Dean cuts himself off, shaking his head. “I want to play the song, Cas. You want to hear it?”

“Yes, but…”

“But what?”

“We were expected to write romantic lyrics,” Cas points out. “It… are you sure you won’t be uncomfortable?”

Dean lifts his brow.

“I won’t think you’re hitting on me, Cas.”

Cas studies him for a long moment, a strange look on his face.

“All right,” he says with a resigned sigh, and Dean picks up the guitar.

Closing the door, he takes his time stripping off the guitar case before he makes his way over to where Cas is sitting.

He sits down on the edge of the coffee table and strums a couple of times. Cas just looks at him from the love seat. Dean shifts, suddenly nervous, but he tells himself to get over it. He’s the idiot who suggested they do this, after all.

“Well?” he says, and Cas just looks at him.

“I can’t start singing until you start playing,” he says, pausing to add; “And please don’t laugh at my voice. One of the women in the workshop said I couldn’t carry a tune even if I had a bucket to put it in. I didn’t like hearing it from her, and I’d like it less from you.”

“Someone actually said that to you?”

“Not to my face,” Cas says with a little shrug.

Cracking his knuckles, Dean strums a couple of times before he starts. He’s almost at the chorus before he looks up to find Cas staring at his fingers on the fretboard, chewing on his lower lip.

“Pretty sure you missed your queue,” Dean tells him pointedly. Cas blinks and shakes his head.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his face growing pink. “I got distracted. Start over?”

 Feeling all the more self-conscious, Dean does. This time, Cas starts singing almost immediately.

“September night, crashed through the door and I was showered in light, as fate’s gold threads were set aflame,” he sings, and Dean feels his throat closing up, because that sounds a whole lot less like their fake first meeting than it does their real one. “You met my eye, the soul inside just what they told me I’d find. A strength that I could never name.”

His voice is rough and clearly unpracticed, but Dean already feels a more visceral reaction to his
singing than the one he has when he puts Black Dog on the Impala’s stereo and cranks the volume to eleven. It’s too damn much.

Overwhelmed before they’ve even reached the first chorus, he settles his gaze on the fretboard, staring at his own fingers as they move over the strings.

“I had such pride. Was certain that I had the truth on my side. How quickly pride can turn to shame.”

For a couple of bars, Castiel only hums, and Dean works up the courage to look up at him again. His eyes are closed, a crease between his brows as he concentrates. He opens his mouth in anticipation of the second verse, and Dean can practically see him counting the bars in his head. He grins at the sight.

“How could I’ve known, I’d found someone who would inspire me to grow. Who’d show me all I’d gone without,” Cas sings, and Dean’s grin softens a little. He’s glad Cas still has his eyes closed. He doesn’t think he’d be able to handle it if Cas was looking at him right now. “A million years, of keeping quiet, of telling no-one my fears, until you heard me voice my doubts.”

The memory of a park bench, years ago, crosses Dean’s mind.

“And in dark times, you held your ground, I knew you wanted to hide. Those days are hard to think about.”

A pained expression flickers over Cas’ face before he hums his way through the chorus again. Though his eyes have opened, his gaze is fixed on his own hands.

“We’ve been through hell, through trials of fire, but I’ve seen heaven as well, and it’s with you, it’s not above.”

Dean knows laughing at that would be a dick move, so he forces himself not to. He suspects Alton had a lot to do with turning that particular line into a metaphor.

“And though I’ve strayed, I hope you know that I’ve been longing to stay. These things just go unspoken of.”

The urge to laugh fades.

“Because I’m scared, I’ll say too much when I am so unprepared,” Cas falters a little, the next line coming out slightly out of time and awkward. “How quickly pride can turn to shame.”

Dean can’t help but frown. The lack of rhyme and repeated line jarring and strange compared to the rest of the song, but he barely has a moment to question it before Cas is singing again, the melody changing as Dean plays the outro.

“I never challenged, never questioned anything. Each move directed by my family pulling strings. But their control over my life was all destroyed, on that night you met my eye in Illinois,” Cas finally glances up at him, a nervous look on his face as he repeats the line. “On the night you met my eye in Illinois.”

He gives Dean a small smile, the final repetition a little quieter as Dean’s strumming softens.

“On the night you met my eye.”

After a couple more strums, Dean stops playing. Cas holds his gaze. The room feels too small all
“You really wrote all that?” he finally asks.

“With assistance,” Cas says, looking away. “But yes, I did. Alton gave us all a set of headphones to listen to the music, but the words were up to us. He mainly helped with, uh… the mechanics of it.”

“You’re wasted as a hunter, Cas,” Dean tells him. “I’d buy your album. That woman who said you couldn’t sing can fuck right off.”

Cas fails to fights off a smile, looking at the floor.

“Alton also gave us a list of words we could use,” he says, clearly trying to talk himself down.

“Stop doing that,” Dean says.

“What?”

“Trying to dodge the compliment. Who do you think you are? Me?” He lifts his brow, and Cas frowns at him. “Really, Cas. You did great. Take the praise.”

Cas just looks at him for a while, his cheeks turning crimson and then slowly fading back to normal.

“I think it’s time we went to bed,” he says, and Dean fumbles the guitar, nearly dropping it on the floor.

“What—”

Cas stares at him with wide eyes.

“I didn’t— I’m tired, is what I meant.”

“Right,” Dean says, and shakes his head. Idiot. “I knew that. I, um—”

“It’s your turn, anyway,” Cas tells him, getting to his feet. “I’ll just get my things from the room.”
The sound of heavy, agitated footsteps thunking down the two steps into the bedroom pull Dean back from the edge of sleep, and he sits up, blinking just in time to see a stony-faced Cas advancing on him.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“That couch is too short and this bed is enormous. If you’ve got a problem with sharing, you can sleep out there.”

Without another word, he yanks back the blankets on the other side and climbs into bed, his back to Dean.

Cas falls asleep within minutes, and Dean stares at him for hours. He can’t stop thinking about how they’d been touching at the cookout. He wants that now. He wants to bridge the gap between them and press against his back, rest his palm against Cas’ stomach and hold him close.

He doesn’t. He can’t.

Dean finally sleeps, but it’s light and fitful, and when he wakes up he’s disappointed to see that Cas has stayed completely on his own side all through the night.

It’s not quite eight in the morning, and Cas is a late sleeper, so Dean gets out of bed as quietly as possible and heads out onto the deck. Thin, misty rain clings to everything. Dean closes his eyes, leaning against the railing, and just breathes.

He’s tired. Exhausted, really. It’s only the third day of this hunt, with another three before they’re supposed to check out, and he’s not sure how much more he can take. Maybe it’d be better if they just acted like a couple all the time, instead of only when they’re out of the cabin. It’s the whiplash that’s getting to him. Constantly switching between two sets of boundaries.

*Bad idea,* he thinks, and opens his eyes to stare down at the water.

It’s only a moment before he sees the woman with long red hair.

He darts back inside.

“Cas!” he says, shaking the edge of the mattress and startling him awake. “She’s back.”

Cas blinks at him for a second before Dean’s words seem to register, and then he’s on his feet, hurrying to follow Dean back outside.

She’s still there, slowly walking along the water’s edge, a faint green glow trailing after her. Cas stares right at her, then looks at Dean with a shrug.

“I don’t see her.”

"What do you mean you don’t see her?” Dean asks, jabbing his finger toward the water. "She's right there!"

Cas squints for a moment, then shakes his head.

“There’s nothing,” he says. “Are you sure it was her?”
“Dude, it’s still her. She’s-- hold on.”

Running back into the cabin, Dean grabs his cell from the bedside table and turns on the camera, bringing it back outside to snap a quick picture of her. Nothing turns up. He raises and lowers the phone, looking at the woman by the water, and photograph of the empty beach with a frown.

After a minute, she’s gone.

“At least this might help us work out what she is,” he says.

Cas hums thoughtfully.

“You have an idea?” Dean asks.

“I think we may be dealing with a fairy.”

Dean thinks back over the articles Charlie had collected. UFO sightings near the lake. He wants to smack himself in the head.

"Those who have visited Avalon are able to see the creatures born of it,” Cas goes on. “I expect that's why she's visible to you even though she isn't targeting you.”

"Yeah, but you can't see her," Dean points out, and it takes a little too long for Cas to respond.

“Oh-- Dean, I’ve never been to Avalon.”

Dean raises his brows, a slow grin appearing on his face. There’s not many areas in which he can one-up Cas, so this is weirdly satisfying.

“Seriously?”

“I never had any reason to go.”

Dean laughs, and it’s a smug sounding thing.

“Hah! I’ve been somewhere you haven’t been.”

Cas frowns.

“I’ve been to the moon,” he says after a moment.

Dean pulls a face.

“Also Jupiter.”

“Pfft, bullshit,” Dean says, rolling his eyes until he sees the deadly serious expression on Cas’ face. “Wait, seriously?”

Cas’ smirk at that is even greater than Dean’s own. He pulls out his phone to call Sam--mainly to end the conversation.

Sam answers on the third ring.

“We’re pretty sure we’re dealing with a fairy,” Dean tells him before he can say anything. “Don’t ask how unless you want to hear Cas being a smug bastard.”

“You know what kind?” Sam asks.
“No idea,” Dean tells him. “But it’s a start, right?”

“Yeah, for sure. Did you text Kevin?”

Dean glances at Cas to see him typing on his phone.

“Cas is doing it now. You get to Salem yet?”

“About half an hour ago,” Sam tells him. “But there’s been a slight--”

“They’re not here,” Charlie calls out, her voice a little muffled but clear enough to understand, and Dean lifts his brow as he looks over at Cas.

“The Ortegas aren’t there,” he passes on, and switches to speaker.

“Where are they?” Cas asks.

“Back in Phoenix,” Sam tells them with a sigh, and there’s a shuffling sound as he puts his own phone on speaker. “They were discharged yesterday.”

“What’s the plan, then?” Dean asks. “You guys gonna head down? It’s a long-ass drive to Arizona.”

“Well, I was thinking,” Charlie says, and there’s a huff of air that Dean guesses is Sam wholeheartedly disapproving of whatever Charlie is about to say. “It would be a bad idea for us both to leave, in case you guys need back-up. So Sam’s going to bring me back to where we were staying near you guys, and then he’ll drive down on his own to meet with them.”

“That makes sense,” Dean says.

“You’re supposed to tell her we should stick together,” Sam tells him.

“Sure, if either of you were doing the monster half of this hunt,” Dean reasons. “But I don’t think the research team needs a buddy system.”

Sam sighs.

“Fine. I’ll drive down. Just don’t try anything until we know for sure what kind of fairy she is.”

***

For the first time since they arrived, Cas insists on being the one to drive down to Bon Vivant for breakfast, and Dean hands over the key to the cart.

“I enjoy driving,” he tells Dean as they reach the restaurant.

“Yeah?”

“Mm,” Cas nods, shutting off the humming engine as he looks over at Dean. “I can see why you love the Impala so much.”

“Are you seriously comparing this dinky little golf buggy to my baby?”

Jumping out onto the sidewalk, Cas rolls his eyes.

“Why on earth would I try to drive such a wedge between us?”
Dean shakes his head with a laugh and follows him to the restaurant.

They end up sharing a large table with Kat and Alexa, who convince them to join the art class they’re going to after breakfast. It doesn’t take much convincing: Lauren and Andre had gone to the class, after all.

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The art studio is a squat stone building on the east side of the island, covered on one side by flowering vines. As they approach, the sweet smell of flowers grows strong and heady.

There are already a few couples sitting around the room when they step inside, some looking a little out of their depth, but most look eager to start. Dean sees Kat and Alexa sitting side-by-side by the window, sketchbooks on their laps, along with Jonah and Lee, and to his distaste, Pete and Lucy.

Kat waves them over, and together Dean and Cas make their way across the room.

“Morning!” Kat says when they sit down. “You guys have a good time last night?”

“We did, thank you,” Cas says.

“Sorry we left so early,” Jonah says. “I heard we missed out on some campfire sing-alongs.”

“It’s probably a good thing we weren’t there for that,” Lee says with a laugh. “My drunk ass would have wanted to play *Wonderwall.*”

Dean grins.

“I don’t think I know that song,” Cas says. “How does it go?”

“Don’t encourage them,” Jonah laughs.

The rest of the room quietens, and they all look to the door to see Bellamy walking in. Now that she’s working, she looks like the quintessential artist, down to the frazzled hair and paint-stained shirt.

“I see we have a quite few first-timers here today,” she says, surveying the group. “So I’ll have to ask the rest of you to bear with me a moment while I get the housekeeping out of the way.”

She opens up a cupboard in the wall and pulls out a short stack of sketchbooks identical to the ones being held by Kat and Alexa, which she hands out to the other couples as she talks.

“For the first half hour or so, just have a little experiment with what we have here. Get a feel for the different mediums, see what you like. I’ll be here to help with any questions.”

Dean opens the sketchbook when it’s handed to him, and runs his fingers over the thick paper.

“After that, I’ll ask you all to choose a medium to work with, and then we can get to the part you signed up for.”

Cas glances at Dean.

“I thought this was going to be an instructional class,” he says.

“I guess not,” Dean says.
“This isn’t about skill,” Bellamy says. “The aim is simply to create something for one another. Whether that takes the form of a portrait of your partner, or just a picture of something that you feel would bring a smile to their face, is completely up to you.”

She gestures toward the long counter, loaded with various art supplies, and the couples all make their way over.

Bellamy moves around the group, stopping to talk to each couple, and offers advice on technique.

“Once you’ve settled on a medium, take your supplies and set up wherever you’d like. There’s plenty of courtyard space if you’d prefer to work outside, or you can remain in the studio. Those of you who would like to work on canvas, come let me know and I’ll bring them around--canvases do cost a little extra, so they’ll be charged to your room if you choose to use them.”

There aren’t many things that Dean thinks he’s better at than Sam, but drawing is one of them. Though he’s not nearly as good as his dad was--John’s journal is packed with textbook-worthy illustrations of almost every monster he came across--he’s certainly no slouch, and so he goes straight for the charcoal.

Cas, on the other hand, deliberates for a long while, hovering uncertainly between a palette of watercolors and a set of colored pencils.

“It’s not life or death, buddy,” Dean says. “Just pick one.”

“Feel free to use both,” Bellamy says.

Pleased, Cas picks up both, and follows Dean out the door and into the courtyard.

They set up under the shade of a tree on the side, Alexa and Kat to their left and another couple--Rebecca and Tim--on their right.

Dean studies Cas for a long time before he makes his first mark on the paper, though he doesn’t really need to. It’s not as though he hasn’t watched him before. He could pick that jawline out of a line up; would know him by the cowlick over his ear. But he’s been given an opportunity to look without reservation, and he’s damn well going to get his fill.

When he finally starts, he starts with the eyes, and immediately regrets not choosing a medium with color.

It’s not until he hears Cas speaking to the woman on his other side that he remembers they were meant to be looking for witnesses. Given that it’s already Friday, it’s likely their last chance to speak to any guests who saw anything.

“You’re very talented,” Cas is saying as he looks over at her work.

“We already took this workshop on our second day here,” Rebecca says, shy. “So I already had a little practice.”

“Even so,” Cas says.

“See?” Tim says to her pointedly. “It wasn’t just me saying it. You’re great at this, Bec.”

“Shh,” Rebecca says, a deep blush staining her cheeks.

“Have you been here long?” Cas asks.
“Since Friday,” Rebecca says. “Today is our last day, so we decided to finish the pictures we started last weekend”

“So…” Cas frowns, like he’s just now remembered the case that brought them here. “I suppose that means you were here when the couple went missing?”

Tim’s eyes widen, and he nods as Rebecca leans closer to speak in hushed tones.

“They were actually in the class with us on Saturday,” she says. “I didn’t speak to either of them, but I think she must have been an artist because her work was stunning.”

“Her painting is still in the studio,” Tim says. “I just saw it when I was getting mine from the storage room.”

“Hopefully they’ll be able to pick it up soon,” Rebecca says with a sad smile.

With that, she turns back to her work, and Dean shares a brief look with Cas; they should check out the painting before they leave the class.

“We’ve got another twenty minutes,” Bellamy announces as she steps back out into the courtyard. “Anyone need help?”

A man on the other side of the courtyard calls her over, and Dean returns to his own sketch, carefully adding another line to the rumpled mess of hair on top of Cas’ head. He looks at it for a long moment, then wipes his charcoal-stained hands on his jeans.

“I think I’m done,” he says.

“Really?” Cas asks.

“Yup,” Dean says, turning his sketchbook to show him with a strange bubble of nervous pride swelling in his chest. “What d’ya think?”

“That’s gorgeous!” Kat exclaims, looking at it past Cas’ shoulder.

“Well, I guess that comes down to the model,” Dean says, giving Cas a wink.

Cas swallows, something in his jaw twitching a little before he rearranges his features into a smile that looks more forced than the romantic subplot of Road House.

“It’s excellent,” Cas tells him.

The slow crushing feeling in Dean’s chest says otherwise.

“Yeah,” he says. “Glad you like it.”

He asks to see what Cas drew, but Cas just grips the edges of his sketchbook and flips the cover closed.

“It’s not done,” he says, and then adds a little more quietly. “We should go take a look in the storage room before everyone else goes inside.”

“Yeah,” Dean agrees, and gathers all his things, picking up the easel he’d been using and leading the way.

The air in the storage room is thick with the smell of paint, cold and metallic. Once he’s put his
supplies away, Dean scans the room until he sees what must be Lauren’s painting leaning up against the wall.

“Wow, they weren’t kidding,” he says moving closer to get a better look. “This could be a photo.”

He inspects it closely, but besides the astonishing level of detail, there’s nothing remarkable about the canvas at all. Behind him, Cas looks at it carefully, a strange, almost wistful expression on his face.

“What’re you thinking?” Dean asks.

“She really loved him,” he says.

“You’re getting that from a painting?”

“It’s in the eyes,” Cas tells him with a shrug, and turns to go. “Are we done here?”

***

The whole drive back to the cabin, Dean can tell that Cas is upset about something, but he doesn’t know what it is.

Their lunch hamper is waiting for them on the front step when they get back, and Dean is glad for the distraction it affords.

“Hey, you want to take this down to the beach?”

“Like a picnic?” Cas asks, and Dean gives what he hopes comes off as a disinterested shrug.

“I figure we can keep an eye out for the fairy again, hopefully get a better idea of what exactly she is.”

He doesn’t mention that he’s hoping that lunch in the sunshine will do away with the unhappy pall that seems to be hanging over Cas all of a sudden.

“That sounds wise,” Cas agrees.

“Just give me a minute to grab that picnic blanket,” Dean tells him, and slips inside. Cas follows, putting his sketchbook down on the coffee table while Dean digs through the drawers. A few minutes later, they’re heading down the path toward the beach.

They’re halfway there when Cas pauses and looks back up toward their cabin.

“I left my sketchbook behind,” he says.

“So?”

“So I enjoyed drawing,” Cas says. “I was planning to sketch some more while we eat.”

Dean holds out his hand for the hamper.

“Go back and get it, then,” he says. “I’ll get us set up.”

With a nod, Cas hands it over and heads back uphill.

It doesn’t take too long for Dean to find a sunny patch of grass that separates the trees from the
pebbles and sand, and he shakes out the plaid blanket, sitting the hamper down on the lower edge so it doesn’t get caught up in the breeze. Cas is gone for five minutes before Dean starts wondering why he’s taking so long. Just as he’s about to get up and go look for him he sees him stepping out from the trees.

“You’re not the one who’s taking so long,” he says.

Cas pulls a face for a split second, then sits on the blanket, tossing his sketchbook down as he does. Dean frowns at him.

“What was that?”

“What?”

“The poop face,” Dean says. “And don’t try and tell me there wasn’t one.”

Sitting down beside him on the blanket, Cas folds his knees.

“I noticed we got a few strange looks yesterday,” he says. “And today in the art workshop, too.”

“Strange how?” Dean asks, then narrows his eyes. “Like that Pete guy?”

“Strange, as in people seem taken aback by you calling me *dude* and *buddy*,” Cas says. “To name some examples.”

“Oh.”

“Those aren’t exactly commonly used terms for someone you’re supposedly in a romantic relationship with,” Cas points out, like Dean didn’t know that. Like Dean hasn’t deliberately been using those words with Cas for years just as a way to protect himself.

“Yeah,” Dean says weakly. “I guess not.”

“I’ve noticed a few people calling each other *baby*,” Cas offers, wrinkling his nose. “But that doesn’t sound quite right when I imagine saying it to you. It just makes me think of the Impala.”

Dean snorts.

“Edith called Ray *dear*,” Cas goes on. “But… that also sounds wrong. Do you have any ideas?”

Dean clears his throat and stares at the unopened hamper.

“I could, uh,” he taps his hand on his knee. “I could try calling you, um. Sweetheart, maybe.”

Cas smiles, his brow wrinkling and his eyes scrunching at the edges.

“I like that,” he says, and Dean idly considers throwing himself into the lake. “What should I call you?”

“Ugh, I don’t know, man. Nobody ever really gave me a pet name.”

“Not even--” Cas cuts himself off and looks away, but Dean knows what he was going to say. Not even Lisa. He swallows around the lump that forms in his throat and shakes his head.

“No, not even her,” he says.
“I’m sorry,” Cas says. “I didn’t mean to mention--”

“I know. It’s okay. But the point is, you don’t have to come up with one. Not everyone uses pet names. It’s not a requirement.”

“But I want to,” Cas tells him. Dean feels his eyebrows lift to his hairline, and Cas widens his eyes as though he’s only just realized what he said. “I just think it would help with our cover, that’s all.”

Dean couldn’t stop from blushing if he tried, so he pulls open the hamper instead.

“Just don’t call me sweetcheeks and we’ll be fine,” he says gruffly, and hands over one of the containers of macaroni.

Cas sketches as he eats, and Dean leans back to watch the water.

“You ever gonna show me what you’re working on, there?” he asks after a while, tilting his head toward the sketchbook. Cas glances at him, chewing on his lip before he closes the cover.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Yeah, well the class was called *Art from the Heart*, so I don’t think it counts unless you hand it over.”

Frowning down at the book, Cas taps on the cover with his pencil.

“Why don’t you want to show me?” Dean asks.

“I don’t know if you’ll like it,” Cas says.

“I’ll like it,” Dean promises. “I liked the song last night, didn’t I?”

Cas hesitates before finally handing the book over, and Dean eagerly flips it open. The first page is full of pencil sketches of green eyes in various expressions. Wide and surprised; crinkled at the corners with amusement. One set has them half-lidded, and the thought that Cas drew it makes him feel exposed and warm all over. He swallows loudly and turns the page, only to find a similar collection, this time of lips.

“It’s on the next page,” Cas tells him.

“Oh,” Dean says, and flips to it.

The image that greets him is a swirling shape of gold struck through with green, and at it’s center is a figure drawn in pencil.

“Wow, Cas,” Dean says, touching the page without really thinking about it. “This is....”

“It’s your soul,” Cas says.

That pulls Dean up short. He looks up from the picture with wide eyes.

“What?”

“I can’t see it anymore, so I had to draw from memory.”

He leans over, his chest pressing against Dean’s shoulder as he points out the sweeping shapes.
“It was difficult to translate into a two dimensional image,” he admits, “but this is what it looked like the last time I saw you happy.”

Dean swallows.

“This is a particular memory?”

“It’s what you looked like when you found me in Purgatory.”

Dean’s mouth goes dry as he looks back down, watching how Cas’ fingers trace the picture on the page.

“I’ve been happy since then,” Dean says.

“Not when I’ve been around to see it,” Cas says.

Dean hates that Cas thinks that. He wishes he knew how to say that he’s been happiest when Cas has been there, that most of his good memories in recent years have Cas in the middle of them.

“It’s been a tense few years, I guess,” he says.

***

Walking back along the beach toward their cabin, they pass by Kat and Alexa, who flag them down with a wave.

“What’s up?” Dean asks them, and Alexa glances around before speaking in a hushed voice.

“What are you guys doing tonight?”

“Uh,” Dean says, looking at Cas. “Nothing planned, I don’t think. Why?”

“We’d booked the big hot tub to use with Jonah and Lee, but Jonah’s not feeling well, so there’s an opening. But--”

“Pete and Lucy already tried to take the opening,” Kat says, casting a narrow glare down the beach to where the couple in question are posing while the Ancora portrait photographer stands further up, snapping pictures. “We told them it had already been filled, but they said they’d just ‘come see’ for themselves tonight.”

“We’ll be there,” Cas says before Dean has fully processed the invitation. “What time?”

“Oh, god, thank you,” Alexa says. “They would have just come and intimidated us until they had the tub to themselves. The booking is for six o’clock.”

“We’ll see you there,” Dean tells them.

***

Dean can count on his hands the number of times he’s had the need for a bathing suit. Even as a kid, when he learned to swim it was in one of those survival classes where they toss you into a pool fully clothed so you know how heavy denim gets when it’s wet.

He almost didn’t pack his sole pair of board shorts when they were getting ready to come here, but when he sees the price tag on the pair Cas picks up in the resort gift shop that afternoon, he’s glad he did.
“Should we get changed here, or at the hot tub?” Cas asks him.

“Here, probably,” Dean says. “Otherwise we’ll have to get a locker for our stuff.”

“In that case,” Cas tells him. “I’m going to take a shower and get ready.”

“Uh-huh,” Dean says, digging through his bag until he finds his old shorts. He waits until he hears the shower start up before he gets undressed, then quickly pulls the shorts on. The waistband is uncomfortably snug, and when he bends down to pick up his jeans from the floor the button at the top of the fly pops open.

“Sonofa--” he mutters, sucking in his stomach as he buttons them, but they don’t stay closed for more than three seconds before bursting again.

Now that he thinks about it, he’s pretty sure he hasn’t worn these shorts in about four years. With a sigh, he pulls them off and redresses in his regular clothes.

He knocks on the bathroom door to call over the sound of running water.

“Cas? I gotta go get some new shorts. Won’t be long.”

"I’ll be ready when you get back."

He’s outside and about to climb into the golf cart when he remembers that Cas was the last one to drive it, and he still has the key. With a sigh he turns around and goes back inside, crossing the living room.

“Hey Cas, where’d you put the--” Dean calls out as he steps into the bedroom, and loses the rest of the sentence when he sees Cas standing in the doorway to the bathroom, toweling his hair dry.

Naked.

Dean’s eyes drop south involuntarily, like his libido took control of them despite his brain screaming at him not to look. He feels himself growing hot all over at the sight of him, flushed and wet from the shower.

Cas lowers the towel from his head, noticing Dean for the first time, only belatedly realizing that he’s exposed. Really, Dean should have already left the room.

Why haven’t I left the room yet? Dean asks himself, and blinks, and finally gets his legs working.

Averting his eyes, he hurries back to the living room.

“Sorry,” he says, a little too loud even if Cas is in the other room, and turns on the spot, trying to remember what it was he was even meant to be doing.

His brain is useless, though, choosing instead to needlessly remind him that Cas’s thighs are thick and muscular and in need of some sun, and that he’s got a freckle by one nipple, the skin of which is the same dusty pink as his lips and the smooth head of his--nope, he thinks. Stop. Stop right there.

“Keys,” he says suddenly, turning on his heel. “Cas, I--”

Cas steps out into the living room, and to Dean’s combined relief and disappointment (though what was he expecting, really) he’s pulled on his new shorts. Dean clears his throat.
“You, um. You still have the key. The golf cart key, I mean.”

His voice is impressively even, even if his sentence structure is lacking.

Cas’ tongue darts out over his lower lip, and in an effort not to stare at his mouth Dean’s gaze drops to his still-bare chest. In hindsight, it might not have been a great move; there are still a few stray drops of water clinging to his skin.

“Oh,” Cas says, and Dean lifts his eyes guiltily. “I’ll just--”

“Sorry I walked in on you,” Dean cuts in. “I didn’t see-- I mean I saw, obviously, but I didn’t—I wasn’t looking.”

What the fuck am I saying? Dean asks himself, and forcibly stops himself from speaking. Cas stares at him, his face slowly growing redder.

“I’ll just… I’ll get the key.”

“Great. Okay, thanks Cas. Sorry, Cas.”

Stop saying his name! Dean screams internally. Jesus fucking Christ.

When Cas comes back out, Dean takes the key from him without meeting his eye and darts out of the cabin before he’s forced to speak again.

***

After he’s spent at least five times the acceptable amount of money on a pair of plain black board shorts at the overpriced store, Dean heads back to pick up Cas. The drive down is awkward and silent, and when they arrive at the hot tub Dean hurries ahead of him. He’s not sure if he can handle looking at him right now, so he doesn’t. It’s a solid plan, he thinks.

Kat and Alexa are already in the hot tub, leaning comfortably back against one side, and when Dean sinks into the water opposite them, he makes sure to sit as far from Cas as he can.

Kat takes one look at the gap between them and laughs.

“You don't have to be puritans on our account,” she says, and Dean smiles awkwardly. He glances at Cas, who gulps visibly before shuffling a little closer and putting his arm around Dean. His thumb keeps moving against Dean's skin. Their thighs are pressed together, and under the water Cas’ skin feels silk-soft and warm.

Dean has no idea what they all talk about for the next hour but suddenly Kat announces that she's pruney as hell, and then she and Alexa are leaving and gone and Dean is still sitting cozy with Cas in the bubbling water.

He can feel his heart pounding like a drum. He clears his throat.

“I’m, uh. I’m feeling pretty waterlogged myself,” he says, carefully sliding his arm out from behind Cas’ shoulders, and stands, only belatedly realizing that he’s put his crotch right at the guy’s eye level.

Looking down at him is a mistake. Dean does it anyway and feels his knees falter at the sight of his face, flushed and blinking up at him. He knows, without a shadow of doubt, that this particular angle is going to feature in every sexual fantasy he has from now on, whether he wants it to or not.
Cas slips a little as he climbs out after him, and Dean catches his hand.

“You good?” he asks, his voice disconcertingly rough.

“Yes,” Cas tells him, and Dean tries desperately not to replay the equally husky response back in his head. He fails. Gulps.

“Come on,” he says, pulling Cas across the decking toward their towels before he realizes that the only reason he’s capable of pulling Cas anywhere is that he’s still holding his hand. He loosens his grip to drop it; Cas squeezes it tighter.

His stomach flips wildly, the sensation stirring ever lower even as he tries not to read into it, and he looks at Cas’ face. He’s glaring daggers.

With a frown, Dean follows his line of sight until he sees Pete and Lucy sitting at a picnic table nearby, dressed in swimsuits and glaring right back. When Pete’s eyes drop to their joined hands, his mouth twists into a disgusted pucker.

The reaction makes Dean feel a childish kind of spite.

Without a thought, Dean tugs his hand free, only to slide it around Cas’ waist and pull him into the kind of embrace that usually comes after—well. Coming.

*Well, shit*, he thinks. *I might as well do it right.*

Lifting his other hand, he weaves his fingers through the hair at the back of Cas’ head.

“Figured I’d give them something to glare about,” he says quietly, his lip just barely grazing Cas’ earlobe, and Cas finally seems to catch up, bringing his own hands up to press against Dean’s back before he turns his face a little to speak into his ear.

“Well it worked,” Cas says, sliding his palms down over Dean’s bare shoulders in an incredibly distracting way as his stubble rasps against Dean’s cheek. “They’re leaving.”

It doesn’t occur to him that this means he should let go. He can feel Cas’ knees bumping against his own, their chests bare and pressed flush together, and he’s lost all higher brain function. Cas’ hands are still moving on his skin.

“Mm, good,” Dean murmurs.

He’s pretty sure it was supposed to be a response to what Cas said, but it comes out low. Rough. He blinks, finally realizing that things are about to get very uncomfortable, and pulls away. Cas watches him carefully but doesn’t comment, simply turning to continue toward their cart.
He’s sure they left the hot tub.

Somehow though, Dean is standing at it’s edge. A warm, wet hand slides up and down his forearm. Fingers slip between his, a thumb at his wrist, and soon all he knows is the impression of skin, sweat-damp and hot. Hands move along his sides, over his shoulders, into his hair to tug.

The rasp of stubble against his throat, his chest, his stomach, his thighs.

Dean feels breath against his cock, teasing, and when he looks down Cas is there with his hands spread over his hips, thumbs pressing into the dip of his pelvis as he moves to take Dean into his mouth.

His tongue barely grazes the head before Dean wakes up, short of breath and hard as marble, and as quietly as possible he slides out from under the covers, heading for the bathroom.

It’s nearing six o’clock, so he peels off his t-shirt and his boxers, pressing his teeth together at the sensation of cotton dragging over his sensitive cock. In the shower he leans his forehead to the wall and lets the water pummel his shoulders as he works his hand fast and rough between his legs.

When he comes it’s with a wrench of guilt in his chest, and he washes quickly, drying off and dressing as quietly as he can.

Cas is still fast asleep when he leaves the bathroom, turned toward the middle of the bed with one hand splayed out on the mattress. He’s snoring a little on every third breath, and somehow it sounds adorable instead of infuriating.

Dean doesn't know how much more of this he can take.

Having Cas this close is killing him, and with no one else here to give him some breathing room he knows it's only a matter of time before he does something to give himself away. He came close enough last night with that hug.

He contemplates calling Sam, but he doesn't know what he could even say--the truth sure as hell isn't an option, because even if Sam ends up being as cool about the whole thing as Dean suspects he would be, Dean can't live with the pitying expression that would take up permanent residence on his brother's face if he knew Dean was this hopelessly in love with Cas--but he thinks he can call Charlie.

He can tell Charlie.

She's gay, so she's basically honor bound not to out him. And what's more, she doesn't live in the same building as him and Cas, so even if she does give him pitying looks they'll be few and far between.

It’s not-quite-seven in the morning, but Dean pulls an Ancora robe over his t-shirt and boxers, and takes his cell from it’s charger on the nightstand. Ducking out onto the balcony into the crisp morning air, he can still see Cas through the window, his bare arms wrapped around his pillow and his mouth half-open.

Before he can talk himself out of it, Dean shoots off a quick text--call me when you’re up--and peeks in through the window one last time before he hops down the stairs onto the stony path.
By the time he’s halfway to the water, his cell is buzzing in his palm. His heart races in panic. He breathes out slowly and rubs the heel of his hand over his eyes.

“Hey Charlie.”

“Is everything okay?”

She sounds worried, and he feels a little guilty for keeping the message so short.

“Yeah, yeah. No problems. I just, uh… I needed to… I need your help with something.”

“Alright…”

“You don’t have Sam on Skype or anything, do you?”

“Not right now,” she tells him through a yawn. “I can try him, but he’s probably—”

“No!” Dean just barely manages to keep his voice down, and he can almost hear the way Charlie sits up straighter.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“I, uh…” Dean’s mouth runs a little dry, and he sinks down onto the cool pebbles of the beach. They dig uncomfortably into his butt, and he shuffles around. “Ugh, I didn’t really think this through.”

“Dean, it’s pre-coffee o’clock and I have literally no idea what you’re talking about. Throw me a bone here, dude.”

“I’m just… having some issues, I guess.”

“With what?”

“The undercover thing.”

“What about it?”

“The undercover with Cas thing. The whole… pretending. To be, y’know…”

“Gay?” Charlie says, and Dean can hear the judgmental squint in the sharp tone of her voice.

“A couple,” Dean corrects her. “It’s… harder than I expected.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” she says tersely. “It’s pretend.”

“Yeah, well maybe I don’t want to pretend.”

The words all come out in a rush, and Dean feels strangely weightless once he’s said them. Or more like he’s lost all sense of gravity and is now in danger of being flung out into space. Still, he’s not expecting Charlie to sound hurt.

“Seriously, Dean?” she snaps, a wavering sound in her voice that makes his insides turn to jelly. “I know you’re a little out of your comfort zone, but I thought you were better than this.”

“No, wait,” he says. “You don’t get what I’m--”
“Yeah, I get it perfectly. You’re just another typical straight guy--”

“I’m really not.”

“--so obsessed with proving his--”

“Charlie, I’m bi,” he blurts out, and covers his face. He’s never said it out loud before and fuck, it feels weird. It hurts almost, but like something on it’s way to healing. Like having a dislocated shoulder popped back into place.

For a long moment that’s probably only a second or two, there’s silence. Then, Charlie’s breath all comes out in a whoosh, and she’s off.

“You’re--oh. Oh. Holy frack, Dean I can’t believe I just yelled at you. I’m sorry. Thank you. I’m really sorry.”

“Wait, Charlie, why are you thanking me?”

“For telling me?” she says, her voice raising like it’s a question.

“I really didn’t want to,” he admits, digging the fingers of his left hand into the pebbles and letting the cool stone ground him. “But, y’know.”

“Yeah, I kinda do,” she says. “You feel better?”

“Not really.”

She sighs.

“I’m sorry,” she tells him. “I guess this whole case has probably felt like being forced out of the closet.”

He frowns at that, picking up one of the bigger pebbles and rolling it in his palm.

“That’s… honestly, that’s not really the part I’ve had a problem with.”

There’s a long pause, and Dean guesses she’s running back over their whole conversation to figure out what she’s missed because the next sound out of her mouth is a gasp.

“You have feelings for Cas.”

“Took you long enough,” he jokes weakly.

“My gaydar is broken,” she says, her voice tinged with disbelief.

“Actually, I think in this case the term is bi-fi,” Dean jokes, and she snorts in disbelief.

“How did I not notice? I’m an idiot.”

“No, I’m just really good at hiding shit,” Dean tells her. “Or, y’know. I was. Now I’m not so sure. It’s getting harder to switch off. We get back to the cabin after spending all day acting like some happy couple, holding hands and touching all the time, and we’re sharing the bed, and I can’t--”

“You’re sharing the bed?”

“We weren’t, but… There’s only one in the room, and the couch is this tiny loveseat,” Dean tells
“Oh, Dean,” she sighs. “That’s rough.”

“You’re telling me. He makes this little snuffly noise when he’s sleeping. It’s adorable.”

“You’re scared he’s going to find out?” she guesses, and he nods into his hand, pressing at his closed eyes.

“He’ll find out. And he’ll leave.”

“He wouldn’t leave,” she says.

“How would you know? You only met him four days ago. You’ve had like three conversations that weren’t about the case, and one of them was about the best way to prepare potatoes.”

“You’re forgetting that I’ve read all the books, Dean. And I’m an excellent judge of character,” she says, and he can tell she’s smiling. It puts him at ease—a little. “Also… not trying to push or anything, but why exactly are you assuming he’d be opposed to the idea?”

“Have you met me?” Dean asks her.

“Point.”

“And I mean, he’s… the guy did me a favor and then spent the next five years getting his ass handed to him by the rest of Heaven. He was fine for forever and then I came along and fucked up his life.”

“Maybe you’re looking at the facts all backwards,” she points out. “You say Heaven gave him the shaft for helping you—well, he kept helping you anyway. Did you ever consider that he knew what the consequences would be, and still chose you?”

Dean grits his teeth.

“I can’t,” he says. “I can’t consider that.”

“Why not?”

“Because, Charlie. That way lies hope.”

“Hope isn’t a good thing?”

“Hell no, hope isn’t a good thing. It’s step one in the how-to-get-your-soul-crushed handbook.”

“Okay,” she says, and he’s glad she doesn’t try to tell him he’s being ridiculous. He knows he is. But at the same time, the idea that Cas would be even remotely on board with how Dean feels about him is at least twice as absurd.

“What should I--”

“I have no idea,” Charlie tells him.

“Crap.”

“Yeah, pretty much. Usually in cases of unfortunate feelings I’d just say, distance yourself until it goes away. But one; that’s not possible right now. And two; if I’m re-interpreting your post-
Purgatory blues right, distance isn’t going to help with this one anyway. You know what they say about absence.”

“Right.”

“Why don’t you… and I know you’re gonna give me the *hope stinks* line over this, but hear me out. Why don’t you use this as an opportunity. Hold his hand a little longer than you need to, and see how he reacts.”

“Hope stinks,” Dean tells her flatly.

She sighs.

“Try and focus on his flaws?” she offers, but Dean doubts that’s going to help him either. Before he can say as much, he hears a quiet little *blip* on the line, and Charlie makes an apologetic noise. “Sam’s calling me.”

“This conversation never happened,” Dean tells her.

“What conversation?”

“Thanks, Charlie.”

“Don’t mention it,” she says back. “And Dean?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for telling me. I know it can’t have been easy.”

“Thanks for listening,” he says.

He sits for a few more minutes after ending the call, reluctant to return to the cabin even if he does feel a little lighter now that he’s not trying to carry the weight alone. It’s only when the stones start to really dig in that he forces himself to his feet and heads back uphill.

Cas is just waking up as he pushes open the door, and he blinks up at Dean in the early morning light with his only visible eye, the other pressed against the pillow that he’s still clutching to his chest.

“Where did you go?” he asks a little blearily.

Dean shuts the door gently behind him.

“Just getting some air,” he says. “You sleep okay?”

“Mm, very okay,” Cas murmurs, closing his eyes and stretching. “I like sleeping with you.”

Somehow he actually seems to realize how the words sounded, and he opens his eyes sharply.

“I mean--”

Dean laughs awkwardly and wishes Charlie could witness this shit, just so she’d really understand the level of Hell he’s found himself in.

“It’s fine, Cas. I got it,” Dean says, moving around the room to sit back on his own side.
“Do I have to get up yet?”

“Nah, we’ve got some time to kill.”

“Good,” Cas says, and stretches. The motion makes the tendons of his neck stand out. Dean swallows. “What’s the plan for today?”

Dean shrugs.

“I figured—”

“Would you lie back down?” Cas asks him before he can get the sentence out. “You’re making my neck hurt.”

Against his better judgment, Dean does, settling his head against his pillow and looking over at Cas. He’s so close. Nobody should look this good in the morning.

“So… what’s the plan?” Cas repeats after a moment, and Dean blinks.

“Oh. Right. Um… I thought we could check for fairy circles. I know we didn’t see any on the beach, but…”

“Hmm,” Cas says, nodding as much as he can while half-asleep and horizontal. His hair is already sleep-ruffled, and it gets worse with the movement. It looks so soft. Dean’s fingers twitch on the blanket between them. He smooths them over the pillow in lieu of reaching across the space.

“But, um… I thought there might be some sign of them in the shallows.”

“Okay,” Cas murmurs, his eyes drooping completely shut.

Dean stares at him for a long time. He doesn’t mean to fall asleep again.

***

Some sudden noise pulls Dean out of his doze, and he jerks up, nearly falling off the bed. Beside him, Cas blinks owlishly, pushing to his elbows and rubbing at his pillow-creased cheek with one sleepy knuckle.

“What was—”

The brusque knock on the door answers his question, and Dean sucks in a breath through his nose before dragging himself off the bed. When he pulls the door open, a middle-aged woman in a blazer is standing there with a pinched, uncomfortable expression on her face. There’s a silver name tag pinned to her breast: Judith Montague, Resort Manager.

“Good morning,” she says, a little stiffly. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Nah, we were up,” Dean lies, suddenly realizing that his robe is hanging open, and this woman is getting an eyeful of his underwear. He pulls it shut and ties it at the waist just as he hears Cas making his way over. “What’s going on?”

“Unfortunately, I’ve received a complaint about inappropriate behavior, and it’s Ancora policy to follow up on all—”

“What behavior?” Cas asks with a frown.
“Another guest claims to have witnessed you engaging in a… well,” Judith shifts, clearly uncomfortable as she searches for words. “A level of physical intimacy that should perhaps remain behind closed doors while leaving the hot tub last night.”

“What…” Dean frowns, thinking back, before he remembers. “Are you kidding me? We were holding hands! It’s not like we were blowing each other in the steam room!”

Cas looks over at him, and Dean can feel his gaze like a fucking beam on his face. He pointedly ignores it while his cheeks burn. Maybe that example was *slightly* too specific. His dream from last night fills his thoughts, and he’s inordinately glad that Cas isn’t a mindreader.

“Holding hands?” Judith repeats, glancing between them with pursed lips.

“That’s all,” Dean says, then shakes his head as he remembers. “We also hugged, *briefly*. But that’s it.”

“Who made this complaint?” Cas asks, though Dean has no idea why he’s bothering when it’s painfully obvious where this came from.

“I’m not at liberty to--”

“It was that Pete guy, wasn’t it?” Dean says, and when he says the name Judith’s eyes widen a little. “Seriously, that asshole has had it in for us ever since we got here.”

“It’s true. He seems to have an entirely baseless hatred of what he deems ‘alternative’ sexualities,” Cas says, lifting his hands to make air quotes. “I tried to explain to him that assigning qualitative value to a person’s sexuality is both absurd and pointless, but he didn’t seem interested in logic.”

Judging by the bewildered expression on Judith’s face, she’s a little thrown by Cas’s speech. Dean, on the other hand, is used to the occasional rant. The events he’s describing, though, are news to him.

“When was that?” he asks.

“Yesterday,” Cas says, looking over at him. “When I was walking back from getting my sketchbook.”

“That’s why you took so long? What did he say?”

“Nothing I care to repeat. It wasn’t pleasant,” Cas turns back to Judith. “My point is, if anyone is behaving inappropriately, it’s him. I think you’ll find the couple in cabin two have been harassed by him, also.”

“I’m sorry,” Judith says. “I will be speaking with him.”

“You do that,” Dean says, and shuts the door in her face. He hears her golf cart rattling down the road a moment later.

Looking back at Cas, Dean lets out a breath.

“What did he say to you?”

“Dean--”

“Tell me.”
“Why? So you can get even more angry about it?”

“Pretty much,” Dean admits, and Cas sighs, walking away to sit on the love seat.

“He told me that the relationship I have with you is disgusting, and that we should both seek counseling to ‘straighten ourselves out.’ I believe he was attempting a play on words.”

“What a dick.”

“You weren't this upset two days ago,” Cas says.

“Yeah, well. I guess my tolerance for bigoted pricks has reached it's limit. We've got as much right to be here as him. Besides, you saw the way he was practically eating his girlfriends face on the tennis court the day we got here, so he's got some fucking nerve reporting us for public indecency. I can't believe he said that shit to you. If I see that douchebag--”

“Dean,” Cas says, resting a hand on his arm as Dean works himself up. “It's fine. I'm fine.”

Deflating a little, Dean looks at the floor,.

“I've endured far worse than the opinions of imbeciles,” Cas tells him, pausing before he adds, “and we're not actually a couple.”

In the back of his mind, Dean asks why not, and grits his teeth.

“I know. It just... man, it pisses me off to think he's going around spouting that crap to people. Like, what about Kat and Alexa, or Wade and Miles, or Jonah and Lee? He's probably said the same stuff to them, and I mean... Like, Wade and Miles are finally allowed to get married in their home state--you saw how happy they were--and they still have to put up with that shit? Can you imagine having to deal with a guy like that on your damn honeymoon?”

When he looks back at Cas, he finds him smiling at him. It’s a quiet kind of smile. Fond. It makes Dean feel hot all over.

“What?” he asks.

“You're a good man, Dean,” Cas says.

Dean just rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, okay,” he says, pushing to his feet. “Let's go get something to eat. I'm starving.”

***

Kevin calls while they're driving back from breakfast, and Dean pulls the cart over under the shade of a quaking aspen to answer on speaker.

“What's up, Kev?” Dean asks, and when Kevin answers his voice has that keyed-up quality it gets when he's certain he's on to something.

“I'm pretty sure we're dealing with a croí-bhriste fairy,” Kevin says.

“A broken-hearted fairy?” Cas asks, and Dean glances over at him with a raised brow.

“Yeah,” Kevin says. “According to the lore, they form lakes from their tears in places where the veil is weakest, and any heartbroken couples who touch the water are spirited away to Avalon.”
“Okay, but what about the Ortegas?” Dean asks. “Do these things usually send people back?”

“Only sometimes,” Kevin admits. “Lore says that this kind of fairy doesn’t actually mean to do any harm. Their whole deal is that they want to keep couples together, so they taken them away and force them to be alone with each other. It’s pretty messed up, but they think they’re helping.”

“They send them back if they manage to get the couple back together?”

“Basically,” Kevin says.

“I mean… it fits in some ways,” Dean says, scrunching his nose. “But from what we’ve heard about Lauren and Andre, they weren’t in any kind of trouble. There’s nothing about their relationship that seems off. Hell, Andre was planning to propose on Saturday.”

“Maybe he proposed on the beach and Lauren said no,” Cas suggests. “That would account for both of them feeling heartbroken, especially if she cared for him but not in the way he wanted.”

Dean hates how much he can relate to that.

“It did look like he was holding the ring box in the security footage,” Kevin points out.

“Yeah, I guess,” Dean says, though he’s still unconvinced, and turns to Cas. “Do you really think she would have said no, though? You said yourself that it looked like she really loved him.”

“I think… I think it’s impossible to truly know what another person is feeling,” Cas says with a shrug. “What looks like love to me might be something entirely different to someone else. I’m obviously not an expert on the topic.”

“I guess,” Dean admits with a sigh. “So what’s your idea, Kevin?”

“Well,” Kevin says. “Assuming she’s a croí-bhriste, she’s not violent. It might be possible to reason with her.”

“Is there any record of that working before?” Dean asks.

“Yeah,” Kevin says, but he’s hesitant about it.

“But?”

“But only once,” Kevin admits. “A croí-bhriste in Lough Sheelin in Ireland was convinced that she was doing more harm than good by the children of the couple she’d kidnapped, and returned them before leaving the lake for good.”

“What happened the other times?”

“That’s the only record of anyone trying to reason with one,” Kevin says. “All the other records have hunters going in swinging, and either the croí-bhriste was killed and the couple were never returned, or the croí-bhriste survived, and—“

“And the couple were never returned,” Dean finishes. “Great.”

“It’s worth a shot, right?” Kevin says.

Sighing, Dean hands the phone over to Cas and starts the cart up again.

“Reasoning with a fairy,” he says. “Why do I feel like this is going to be a fucking disaster?”
It’s warm enough that they leave their over-shirts in the cabin, and they sit side by side on the beach to look out over the water and wait. And wait.

And wait.

“Do you see her yet?” Cas asks after nearly an hour, and Dean shakes his head, finally giving in to the desire to lean back on his elbows. After a moment, Cas mirrors the action, and Dean feels the smooth skin of Cas’ arm pressing against his own. He doesn’t shift away.

In his head, Charlie’s voice is telling him to just try, and though he still thinks she’s nuts for suggesting it he figures, *fuck it*.

With an unsteady breath out, he hooks his little finger over Cas’ on the sand between them.

If Cas has any thoughts on it, he doesn’t make them known, and Dean wonders how long he has to wait to move his hand again without it looking awkward.

“Maybe she knows we’re waiting for her,” he suggests after a few minutes.

“Perhaps,” Cas agrees.

“There’s gotta be a way to summon her. If she doesn’t turn up by noon, I say we call Kevin back and see if he can find a spell.”

Further along the beach to the left, a couple Dean recognizes from the ferry they caught here are splashing around in the water, and for a while Dean gets distracted by their easy laughter. He only turns away from them when there’s a flash of movement in his periphery, and then he’s on his feet in an instant.

Long red hair. Flowing dress.

He’s rushing across the beach, and it’s not until he’s twenty feet away, when the woman turns around and he sees her handful of glossy papers, that he realizes she’s not the fairy. She sees him stagger to a stop, and Dean gestures toward the papers, glad for the excuse they give him for chasing her across the beach.

“Sorry, I just, uh. I was calling out,” he lies, a little out of breath as Cas comes to a stop beside him. “I just wanted one of those—”

“Didn’t hear you,” she says, pushing her long hair back over her ear and drawing Dean’s eye to the hearing aid there in the process. Dean immediately feels bad for lying about having called out to her. Before he can say anything else, she takes a leaflet from the stack and holds it out to him. “There’s still space in today’s class, if you’re interested.”

“Yeah, we’ve been hoping to get to, uh—” Dean says, taking the leaflet, and blanches at the words staring back at him. “Couples yoga.”

“We’ll be there,” Cas tells her brightly, and she beams.

“It starts in an hour,” she says, and with a little wave, she’s off, heading toward another couple further along the beach. God dammit, Dean thinks.

Somewhere on the road between Oregon and Arizona, Sam is probably cackling without knowing
why.
Mellow music flows out through the doors of the yoga studio, and Dean exhales slowly as he looks over at Cas, whose amusement has been palpable ever since they left the beach.

Dean had hoped that Kevin would give them a summoning spell immediately and effectively put the kibosh on them taking this class, but when they called him from the cabin Kevin just said that the only book he knew of with any kind of fae summoning ritual in it was *Magicae Adopertum Atque Aliae*.

“It’s in the Impala,” he says. “I’ll take a look in the library, but you’re better off calling Sam.”

Sam is less than helpful.

“I’m not giving you a summoning ritual when we’re still missing half the details. You can wait until I’ve met with Isaac and Teresa.”

So now they’re here. At couples fucking yoga.

“I can’t believe you actually made me come to this,” he mutters, and Cas just presses his palm flat against Dean’s back until he takes the last few steps inside.

“It’s good for you,” Cas tells him.

“So’s jogging,” Dean says. “ Doesn’t mean I’m gonna start doing it.”

“Humor me,” Cas says, and with a long-suffering sigh, Dean allows himself to be lead to the last remaining space on the left side of the room. In front of them, the red-haired woman from the beach is standing on a slightly raised platform that’s too low to be called a stage, and she’s traded her long, flowing dress for purple leggings and a crop top. Beside her, another woman in a matching green outfit looks out over the class.

“Welcome to couples yoga,” the woman in green says, rising up onto the balls of her feet as she spreads her hands out to the group. “I’m Kiara, and today Amy and I will teach you some poses to really make you feel connected with your partners.”

Dean wants desperately to make a kama sutra joke, but with a glance around the room he finds everyone else—including Cas—watching the stage area intently. He holds his tongue.

“We’ll start off with a simple union pose,” Amy says, and with that, the two of them sit back-to-back with their legs crossed, hands resting on their knees. The room full of couples mirrors their actions immediately. “Take a moment to simply feel your partner at your back.”

Following their movements, Dean crosses his legs and straightens his back, leaning against Cas. He breathes as steadily as he can, and can’t help but feel each breath Cas takes behind him. He’s warm, his t-shirt soft.

While Cas inhales, Dean exhales. It’s nice, weirdly enough.

Dean’s not sure he’s ever felt such a deep sense of calm.

“Wonderful,” Kiara says, and instructs them on their next pose. “Now, inhale and reach your arms up overhead. Really feel your spine lengthening.”
She looks out over the group.

“Good. Now, exhale and twist to the right,” she demonstrates with an exaggerated breath out. “And rest your right hand on the inside of your partner's left knee and your left hand on the outside of your right knee.”

Dean does as she says, and immediately wishes they’d worn track pants instead of shorts. As it is, he’s touching the warm skin of Cas’ leg, and it really hits him that of course there’s going to be intimate touching here. It’s couples goddamn yoga. Cas’ hand touches him in the same place, and Dean lets out a shaky breath at the sensation.

“Excellent,” Kiara says. “Now hold for five breaths, and come back to union pose.”

Those five breaths feel like they take five minutes, though in reality Dean’s sure it’s more like ten seconds. Back in union pose, he glances up at the clock.

Twenty-five minutes to go.

***

Dean stops watching the clock pretty soon after, losing himself in the calm movements and the touch of Cas’ hands. When Amy announces that they’re done, he’s disappointed. Apparently he loves yoga. Goddamnit.

Cas looks irritatingly smug as they make their way back outside, and Dean looks at him with narrowed eyes.

“What?”

“You enjoyed that.”

“Yeah, fine. I did,” Dean says, then jabs a threatening finger toward him. “Not a word to Sam.”

Cas lifts his brow.

“Hmm…”

“What hmm?”

“I think I could be persuaded to keep this to myself.”

Stopping by their cart, Dean shoots him an incredulous look.

“You can’t blackmail me, Cas.”

“So if I promised not to tell Sam that you enjoyed yoga so long as you promised to do it with me again, you wouldn’t agree?”

Dean blinks. That’s… not the worst deal he’s ever been offered. Might be one of the best, if he’s being honest. He hesitates, and a slow smile starts to spread over Cas’ face like he already knows he’s won. Motherfucker.

“You can’t tell Kevin, either,” Dean groused. “Or anyone. I’ve got a reputation to uphold.”

Cas grins wide, his eyes crinkling, and Dean’s heart pounds with love.
“I hate you,” he says with a smile.

“Okay,” Cas replies.

Dean’s phone digs into his thigh when he climbs into the driver’s seat, and when he pulls it out he finds a message from Kevin.

**Found a summoning spell. Call me.**

Dean calls him eagerly, handing the phone over to Cas to hold while Dean drives them back to the cabin.

“Sorry,” Kevin says as soon he picks up, which is never a great start to a conversation. “I was just about to text you again. The spell won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“Fine print. It needs to be cast by “a hand untouched by Avalon” and you’ve already been,” Kevin says.

“Cas hasn’t.”

“Yeah, but Cas isn’t a first born son,” Kevin counters. “So, like I said. Sorry. Sam’s gotta be close to Phoenix by now, right?”

“Yeah,” Dean agrees with a sigh, glancing at his watch. “Thanks, Kev.”

Cas pockets Dean’s phone one he’s ended the call, and a few moments later they pull into their parking space. The backs of Dean’s thighs stick to the vinyl driver’s seat. He pulls a face as he climbs out.

“Ugh, I goddamn hate wearing shorts,” he mutters, rubbing at the back of his leg as he makes his way up the path past Cas, who watches him go.

“That’s a shame,” Cas says after a moment. “They look good on you.”

Looking back at him sharply, Dean opens his mouth, and finds he’s got absolutely nothing.

“I’m… just, c’mon Cas,” he gestures toward the door. “Gimme a minute to get changed and we can have lunch.”

***

Dean’s getting changed in the bathroom when his cell starts ringing, the familiar song muffled through the door until Cas answers.

“Hello, Sam. No, he’s just getting changed after, um…” There’s a drawn out pause. “Sports.”

Dean opens the door before he can say anything else, finding Cas sitting on the bed with Dean’s phone pressed to his ear. He lowers it when Dean walks out, looking relieved for a half second before his eyes drop south, and his cheek turn pink. Dean pulls his jeans the rest of the way on and tells himself that doesn’t mean anything. Just like the you-look-good-in-shorts comment didn’t mean anything. And the hundred other things he’s still trying to convince himself don’t mean anything.

He holds out his hand for the phone.
“Hey, Sammy,” he says when Cas hands it over. “Any luck?”

“I’m just waiting for Teresa to meet with me. Isaac isn’t interested in speaking to anyone, but she agreed.”

“You maybe wanna dig up that spell while you’re--”

“She just arrived,” Sam cuts him off.

“Call as soon as you’re done, okay? Unless she gives us anything new, I want to try Kevin’s idea.”

“Yeah, no problem,” Sam says.

Ending the call, Dean looks down at Cas where he’s still sitting on the bed, leaning back on his hands. Dean imagines pushing him to lay back completely and working the buckle of his belt open. He blinks and clears his throat.

“So,” Dean rubs the back of his neck. “Looks like we’ve got some more time to kill.”

“It appears so,” Cas agrees.

His gaze drifts from Dean’s face down to his chest, and Dean is suddenly very aware of the fact that he’s yet to put a shirt on. He’s not sure what to do with his hands.

“You, um… You want to have lunch on the balcony while the weather’s still good?”

With a glance outside at the clouds that are slowly making their way over the hill on the other side of the lake, Cas nods and pushes to his feet.

“I’ll wait outside.”

***

It’s nearing dusk when the clouds overtake the sky completely, and a chill breeze rustles the trees by the balcony. Sam still hasn’t called back.

“You think he’s having any luck?” Dean wonders aloud, and Cas shrugs, taking a sip from the bottle of ginger ale he found in their mini fridge.

“He’d have called by now if they didn’t remember anything.”

“I guess,” Dean agrees, and returns his gaze to the view, tapping his cell on the balcony railing. A drop of rain hits the side of his nose, and he swipes it away with his sleeve.

He’s about to say something else when he sees her.

“She’s back,” he says, standing up straight and pointing down through the trees. Cas squints but shakes his head.

“I still don’t see her,” he says, startling when Dean pushes away from the railing and hurries to the stairs. “What are you doing?”

“I’m gonna try and reason with her,” he says.

“Wait!” Cas shouts after him, then disappears into the cabin, emerging a moment later with a small iron blade which he presses into Dean’s hand. “In case she’s not as friendly as Kevin thinks.”
“Thanks,” Dean says pocketing the knife, and hurries down the stairs, then down the path, all the way to the lakeside.

The fairy is still there, moving slowly through the water that seems to part around her feet, and Dean slows when he gets close.

He spreads his hands toward the fairy, palms out.

“Hey,” he says, as non-threatening as he can manage. “I just want to tal—”

As soon as he speaks to her directly, her calm movements end and her hair whips up around her head like she’s caught in a windstorm. The water rises, crashes, and she moves forward swiftly to grab him by the throat, dragging him into the lake.

Dean doesn’t even have a chance to shout before he’s submerged. He reaches for his blade; it slips through his fingers and sinks like a stone.

***

On the pebbled shore, Dean coughs and wheezes, cold water soaked into his clothes. He can feel slimy seaweed tangled around his ankle, and sharp stones digging into his shoulder blades. Warm hands cup his face, and he feels the phantom touch of something on his mouth. The sensation of having just been kissed.

His lips are tingling, warmer than the rest of his body, and when his vision stops swimming he sees Cas sitting on the stones beside him with wide, haunted eyes. Cas’ face is wet.

“You weren’t breathing,” Cas tells Dean, his voice a little shaky as he rambles. “I didn’t... I don’t know if I actually helped, but I saw it on TV, and--”

"If you wanted to kiss me so bad you just had to ask," Dean slurs back in a half-assed attempt at humor that does little but rattle the fluid in his lungs.

“What?” Cas stares down at him, his cheeks flushed, and wipes at the water on his chin. "Is that ___"

Dean coughs again before he can finish, rolling onto his side to expel more water. He groans and spits. Presses his eyes closed as he catches his breath.

"Are you alright?" Cas asks.

"Yeah, I think so. What happened?"

“She dragged you underwater,” Cas says. “I dragged you back.”

“What happened to her?”

“I’m not sure,” Cas says. “But I don’t think she’s a croí-bhriste.”

Looking out over the now-placid water, Cas squints. He turns back to Dean, offering his hand. Dean allows Cas to pull him to his feet and leans heavily against him when Cas slings his arm around his waist.

He could probably walk on his own, but Cas is warm and solid, and he wants to help. Dean isn’t about to deny him.
By the time they reach the cabin, Dean is shivering all over.

“Come on,” Cas tells him, leading him into the bedroom, where he pushes him to sit on the bed before grabbing a towel. He scrubs it over Dean’s hair and lets it drape around Dean’s shoulders before he kneels to untie Dean’s boots.

Looking down at him, Dean swallows.

“Cas?”

Cas doesn’t answer; just keeps struggling with the damp laces. His fingers slip. He curses under his breath, and the hitch in his voice makes Dean’s stomach roll.

“Cas, hey—”

Reaching down, Dean touches his shoulder. Cas slumps forward, pressing his forehead against the cold, wet denim that clings to Dean’s knee.

“You weren’t breathing,” Cas tells him. His hand is curled around Dean’s shin, fingers tense. “And I couldn’t—”

“I’m okay,” Dean tells him.

“I didn’t know if I could help, and I—”

“I’m okay,” Dean repeats, and his eyes sting when he sees the look on Cas’ face. He shifts his hand from his shoulder to his cheek. “I’m fine.”

Sucking in a deep breath, Cas closes his eyes and nods minutely. Dean’s thumb strokes over the rise of his cheekbone of it’s own accord.

“You helped,” Dean tells him, and shuffles off the bed to kneel with him, wrapping his arms around Cas’ shoulders. Cas clings to him tightly. “I’m really okay.”

He feels Cas nodding against him, and squeezes him again. When he hears the faint sound of his cell phone, he pulls away. Cas frowns, looking around the room.

“I think I left it on the balcony,” Dean says.

Cas hurries out to get it. When he comes back, Dean’s standing, leaning one hand against the bathroom doorway as he pries his shoes off without untying the laces.

“Sam is finished interviewing Teresa,” Cas tells him, looking at the phone. “He wants us to get on Skype.”

Dean gestures to the bathroom.

“I’m just gonna dry off, first.”

“Of course,” Cas says, before looking down at himself. “I should do the same.”

He chews his lower lip as he types a message back to Sam. Dean’s own lips still tingle vaguely with the phantom touch of Cas’. He wishes he could remember what they felt like. He’s zoned out as he tries to remember it, barely aware of Cas stripping down to his underwear in front of him.
Dean takes it all in as if from a distance. His hands are still shaking.

Cas is almost completely dressed before he notices Dean staring, and his hands falter on his belt, just for a moment. He takes a heavy breath, crossing the room to dig through Dean’s duffel.

Ordinarily, Dean would make some complaint about an invasion of his privacy. Considering the fact that he just—however unconsciously—watched the guy get changed, he figures he doesn’t have a leg to stand on.

“Dean?” Cas is looking at him from a couple of feet away, a stack of dry clothes in his hands. Something in the tone of his voice makes Dean think he must have repeated himself a few times already. Dean blinks.

“What?”

“Will you be alright on your own?”

It takes Dean a moment to understand that Cas is referring to the clothes he’s holding, and despite everything the implications of the question make his face feel hot. He nods and takes them, feeling the warmth of Cas’ fingers as he does.

“Yeah, I uh… thanks. Sorry. Adrenaline crash,” he offers with a shrug. “I think I’ll take a shower.”

“Call me if you need me,” Cas says.

Dean hates that he can feel his face burning.

“Yeah,” he nods.

Cas pats his shoulder.

“I’ll make us some coffee.”

With another small smile, Cas heads toward the kitchenette, and Dean takes a couple of steadying breaths before puts the fresh clothes down and strips out of his damp ones.

The shower helps. He lets the hot water work its magic. When he emerges from the bathroom, Cas is stirring sugar into coffee and leaning heavily against the counter.

“You okay?” he asks. Cas looks up sharply before he nods. Dean gives him a dubious frown. “You sure about that?”

“I was just… I know you’re alright, but…”

“I get it, Cas,” Dean tells him. “This was the first time since you lost your mojo that things nearly went south in a bad way. But you know what? You kicked ass.”

Cas smiles, just a little, and withdraws the spoon. He drops it in the sink with a clatter before holding out Dean’s mug and picking up his own.

“We should call Sam,” he says after a moment.

“Yeah,” Dean says, nodding toward the coffee table where the laptop is still set up. “You wanna —”

Cas gestures for him to go ahead, and Dean does. He’s barely taken a step before he feels Cas’
fingers brush through the hair at the back of his head, gentle.

“You still had a leaf in your hair,” Cas explains, but his fingers stay longer than strictly necessary.

“Oh,” Dean swallows and licks his lip as he looks back at Cas. “Okay. Thanks.”

Skyping his brother is the last thing Dean wants to do right now, but they’ve got a case to get to the bottom of, and Lauren and Andre aren’t getting any less disappeared on their own.

The group call is already underway when Dean signs on, and they’re greeted simultaneously with a nod from Sam, a wave from Kevin, and a loud, boisterous “Finally!” from Charlie.

“We didn’t take that long to log on,” Dean says.

“Actually, there were already two missed calls when I saw the text from Sam,” Cas says, before he seems to remember something and looks back at the screen. “Which reminds me—my cell is currently somewhere at the bottom of Hemlock Lake, so if any of you have tried to call me, that’s why I’m not answering.”

“Whoa, hold up,” Sam says, leaning closer to his screen and squinting at them. “Why is your phone in the lake? And why is your hair wet?”


To his utter lack of surprise, nobody laughs when he elaborates. Mostly, they gape at him.

“What happened to waiting until you heard from me?” Sam asks.

“It wasn’t planned,” Dean says, and Sam huffs out an irritated laugh.

“That doesn’t make it sound better, Dean,” he says.

“We were waiting,” Cas says, his voice stern enough that Dean glances over at him. “We were about to come back inside when the fairy appeared, and rather than risk leaving Lauren and Andre in her clutches any longer, Dean attempted the plan we all agreed on. It was a calculated risk, and one any of us would have taken.”

Dean bumps his knee against Cas’.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” he says. Then blanches.

“Sweetheart?” Kevin laughs.

“I, um. It’s part of our cover,” he explains. “Shut up.”

Sam sighs.

“Look, I’m just—are you alright?”

“I’m good,” Dean nods. “Cas added another notch to his Winchester rescue tally.”

“And the croí-bhriste?” Charlie asks.

Dean shrugs.

“Well, for one thing, we’re pretty damn sure she’s not a croí-bhriste,” he says. “But whatever the
“Okay,” Sam says. “Did you notice anything else about her? Like, any markings, any, I don’t know… amulets? Tattoos? What made her show herself in the first place?”

“I don’t know. We were just out on the balcony, and… and it started to rain.”

Beside him, Cas sits up straighter.

“…and?” Charlie says.

“It was raining the first time I saw her,” Dean says, thinking back to Tuesday night in the restaurant. “And then again the next morning, and yesterday too. Crap, how did I not notice?”

“Okay, well that could definitely be something, right?” Charlie asks, and Kevin frowns before standing up, his head disappearing outside of the camera’s view.

“I think— there’s a book somewhere here about…”

Whatever Kevin says is muffled as he walks away, and for a moment his window shows nothing but an empty chair.

“Did anyone catch that?” Dean asks.

“It sounded like he said leather in moderation,” Charlie says. “Which is, you know, great life advice, but not really applicable. So.”

“Weather manipulation,” Kevin says, dropping a heavy book in front of his laptop before he takes his seat again. “There’s a subsection called, uh—” he drags his fingertip down the contents page before he finds what he’s looking for. “Cross-dimensional Meteorological Phenomena. I only skimmed it before because it was talking mostly about the way weather patterns can be affected by different layers of reality, and— nevermind, it’s a whole thing. But there’s also a list of different weather phenomena and the beings associated with them.”

He takes a moment to find the page.

“Okay, here. Rain, summer showers, thunderstorms—”

“What’s under summer showers?” Dean asks.

“Zuni, Ibong Adarna, Amefurikozō,” he reads, mostly to himself, then cross-references them in the glossary. “Well, it’s none of those.”

“Why not?”

“Zuni is a giant who eats the souls of the dead, Ibong Adarna is a bird, and Amefurikozō is a little boy with an umbrella,” Kevin says, checking the next one. “Wait, this one might fit— oh. Did she have a tail?”

“Nope,” Dean says.

“Not Zennyo Ryūō, then,” he frowns and keeps looking, then frowns a little harder. “Hold on, I think this might…”
“You got something?”

“Maybe,” Kevin says, and puts down the book, looking around the library. “I’m just trying to remember—”

“What does it say?”

“This book doesn’t have a lot of details,” Kevin says, patting the cover, “but there’s one here called Aestate Imbine. A water nymph. It says she emerges in summer rain and captures lovers. I’m just trying to think if I’ve seen that before.”

“It’s not in Leabhar na Sí?” Sam asks. Kevin shakes his head.

“I’ve read that thing cover to cover like three times since this case started,” he says, and chews the inside of his cheek for a moment before he bounces to his feet again and darts away. He returns with another book soon after, this one about twice the size of the first.

“Is that leather binding?” Charlie asks.

“Huh?” Kevin says, looking it over. “Uh, yeah, I think so. Why?”

“No reason,” Charlie says, and winks at the screen. Cas lets out a low snort of laughter. Dean looks over at him with a grin.

“Yes—here it is,” Kevin says, hefting the book around and holding the page toward his computer. There’s an engraving of a woman with floating hair and scaled feet, standing in parted waters. “She look anything like what you saw?”

“That’s her,” Dean says.

Lowering the book, Kevin grins.

“Awesome,” he says, and turns it back around to read the description.

“The Aestate Imbine is a nymph cast out of Avalon for her forbidden love of a mortal. Emerging during summer rain, Imbine capture young lovers, whom they envy beyond all measure, and keep them in relative comfort so as to live vicariously through their love. Fiercely territorial, Imbine will not respond well to those who attempt to reach their watery bowers—”

At this, Kevin grimaces and looks at the camera before he continues.

“—though they will return their captives of their own accord if another couple catches their attention. Like the fae, Imbine are vulnerable to iron.”

Looking up, Kevin lifts his brow.

“That’s it,” he says.

“So basically,” Dean says, “we’ve got nothing. We can’t kill her when we don’t know where she’s keeping Andre and Lauren, and we have no way into her, uh… watery bower.”


“Hit me,” Dean says.

“If she takes another couple, she’ll release Andre and Lauren, right?”
“Right,” Kevin says.

“Does she know you’re hunting her?” Sam asks.

“I don’t think so,” Dean says. “I never even got a swing in. She attacked me as soon as I spoke to her, and all I said was ‘hey’.”

“So,” Sam says, widening his eyes at them like he’s waiting for them to finish his thought. “You need to convince her to take you instead.”

“She hasn’t even shown herself to Cas,” Dean points out. “I don’t think she wants us.”

“Well, she only takes couples who are happy together,” Kevin says. “She can probably tell you aren’t a real couple.”

“Then you need to convince her you’re really in love with each other,” Sam says with a shrug, and Dean sincerely hopes nobody else is looking at Charlie right now, because she’s got the worst case of pity face he’s ever seen.

“It’s worth a shot,” Charlie says, though Dean detects the regret in her tone.

“We don’t have much choice, I guess,” Dean says.

"One thing--" Kevin says. "Imbine lure their victims in, like... a vampire's thrall in a trashy romance novel. You'll need to make up some hexbags to keep her from controlling you, or you won't be able to do anything once you're down there. Any kind that works against mind control should do the trick."

Dean gets up to check through the bag of weapons and supplies that Sam and Charlie brought over, and pulls out the necessary spell ingredients.

"On it," he says once he's confirmed he has everything he needs. He starts putting them together while they talk. "When's it going to rain again?"

The light cast by the computer screen flickers over Sam’s face as he does a quick search.

“Uh,” he says, clicking a couple more times. “Nothing but sunshine for the next week.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, it is summer,” he says, pulling a face. “This whole week has been weird, weather wise.”

Dropping the half-made hexbag on the table, Dean rubs the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

"Of course."

“Uh, guys?” Kevin says. “I’ve got this big old book on weather manipulation, remember? Pretty sure there’s a rain spell in here somewhere.”

It only takes another five minutes for Kevin to locate a suitable rain spell, and then for Charlie to find a nearby source—an ex-hunter operating a supply shop under the guise of a new-age book store—for the few things she needs to pull it off.

She texts the supplier a couple of times while they’re all still on the call, relating the conversation back to them as she does.
“She says she’ll head downstairs and open up the store for me if I can get there in the next thirty minutes,” Charlie says, tapping on her phone screen. “I’d better get moving. I’ll text you when I’ve got everything, but I think you’re right about doing this early in the morning. Less chance of anyone seeing you head into the lake.”

Once they’ve all agreed, Charlie signs off, and it’s only a matter of minutes before the others follow. Even so, it’s close to ten o’clock when Dean closes the laptop screen.

“Sam said we’d have to convince her that we were in love with each other,” Cas says when he does, glancing sidelong at Dean in a way that makes him incredibly nervous.

“Yeah.”

“What, exactly, do you think that entails?”

Dean frowns, then shrugs, turning his focus to finishing off the hexbags.

“It’s just… we’ve already *been* acting like a couple,” Cas points out. “I don’t think any of the other guests or the staff suspect that we aren’t one.”

“Neither do I.”

“And we’ve been engaging in ‘public displays of affection’ with some regularity,” Cas says, using those absurd finger quotes in the process. “We’ve held hands, and you’ve had your arm around me, and you touched my hair and fixed my collar. So…”

“So,” Dean repeats vaguely, and Cas lifts his brow.

“So what else can we do?”

Dean can think of a few things. He’s pretty sure Cas can figure out what those few things are, too, but he can’t for the life of him figure out why he’s being coy about it.

“I don’t know,” Dean lies, and Cas looks at him for a long moment before he nods and looks away.

“I need to take a shower,” he says.

“You do kinda reek,” Dean says, glad for the way out of the dangerous territory the previous conversation had put them in. “Like lakewater and seaweed.”

Cas casts an offended look at him, and Dean grins.

While he’s gone, Dean heads into the bedroom to strip off his jeans and over-shirt. His cellphone dings as he’s shoving them into his duffel, and he checks it to find a message from Charlie.

*I’m sorry about this :(*

Dean stares at it for a minute before he answers.

*It’s fine.*

She writes back almost immediately.

*Still. If you need to talk, I’m here <3*

He replies with a simple thanks, and plugs the phone in to charge just as Cas makes his way out of
the bathroom in flannel pajama pants and a cloud of steam. Dean half-smiles at him as he squeezes past.

He’s washing his hands when there’s a knock on the bathroom door, and when he opens it Cas is waiting with his toothbrush between his lips. He takes it out to speak.

“Can I just—”

“Sure,” Dean says, letting him in, and heads back to pick up his own brush. They stand side by side, elbows bumping, and for some reason when Dean accidentally meets Cas’ eye in the mirror he feels his stomach flip like he’s ten years old and his crush just said hello to him.

He tries not to meet Cas’ eyes again while he finishes up, feeling awkward and absurdly embarrassed, but fails horribly. Avoiding his eyes in the mirror is impossible. He’s helpless.

Leaning forward, he cups a palm of water to his mouth to rinse away the remaining toothpaste, and when he stands up Cas is waiting to use the tap. Dean shuffles aside, watching as Cas rinses his toothbrush and taps it on the edge of the sink. He puts it back into his bathroom bag carefully before he looks back at Dean and swipes the back of his hand over the corner of his mouth, turning slightly to lean against the vanity.

Dean’s not entirely sure why they’re still in the bathroom. He should have left already, but his feet are rooted to the spot.

“Can I ask you something?”

Cas’ voice seems too loud now that the faucet is off, and Dean overcompensates for it when he replies, his own voice coming out so low that he has to clear his throat and try again.

“Sure,” Dean says. “What’s up?”

“What you said earlier,” Cas says, and pauses to swallow, the sound loud in the silent bathroom. “Was it just a joke?”

“Was what a joke?”

“I mean, I know it was a joke, but… I was wondering, because sometimes you joke about things that aren’t—”

“Cas, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“What you said by the water. After I pulled you out.”

Dean frowns, wracking his brain.

“What did I say?”

“That I… if I wanted to…” Cas sighs, squeezing his eyes closed like he’s frustrated with his own inability to get the sentence out, and when he opens them and looks back at Dean it’s with determination. “You said I just had to ask, if I wanted to kiss you. Was that true?”

Dean’s heart is in his throat and his stomach is trying to escape through the soles of his feet. He’s not entirely sure how he’s still alive, in all honesty. But Cas is staring at him, waiting, and his expression is impossible to read.

He knows, a little voice in the back of Dean’s mind is saying. He knows and he wants to let you
Another, quieter voice, has another idea.

*He wants to, it says. He wants you to tell him it's true.*

For entirely too long, Dean just opens and closes his mouth, searching for some response that will satisfy both halves of himself. It takes the sight of Cas moving to speak again for anything to come out.

“Not exactly” he says. Cas’ expression falters, just for a second. Dean swallows, hard, and lets out a steadying breath before diving right in. "I just mean, you… You don’t really have to ask. If you want to.”

It takes Cas a moment to parse his meaning, but when he does his eyes go wide and disbelieving, but hopeful. As much as it terrifies him, Dean can't help but reach out.

The cotton of Cas’ t-shirt is soft under Dean’s fingers, his chest is firm, but Dean barely registers either sensation before Cas kisses him. His lips miss the mark a little, catching the side of Dean’s mouth, and Dean turns his head to fix the angle. Their movements are slow but his pulse is racing, and when he feels Cas’s hand twist in his hair his heart pounds faster.

He’s never let himself hope for this.

Sure, he’s had the rare dream, and the considerably less rare daydream, but they were the kind of fantasies he’d put alongside the ones had about Sal Mineo after he watched *Rebel Without A Cause*, or Halle Berry in *Catwoman*. The kind of fantasies that it doesn’t matter if you have. The kind that’re never coming true.

Cas’ palm sweeps from Dean’s hair to cup his jaw; his thumb skirts the corner of Dean’s mouth, coaxing it open, just a little, and Dean’s forgotten every single fantasy he’s ever had. They’re nothing compared to this. Everything about Cas’ mouth against his is warm and heady. Dean’s drunk with it. Dazed. The flutter in Dean’s chest when Cas parts his own lips makes him sigh.

Blindly, Dean slides his palm down over skin-warm cotton, feeling Cas’s stomach tense and quiver at his touch before he grips him at the waist and pulls him closer.

“Should have asked months ago,” Cas sighs against his lips, the words so sweet Dean can almost taste them. He chases them with his tongue.

He cups the heated swell of Cas’s cock through soft flannel. It twitches under his palm and there’s an answering throb between his own legs.

“Fuck,” he breathes against Cas’ throat and presses his hand a little harder.

Cas lets out a low whine against Dean’s throat, and Dean slides his fingers along the length, letting his palm rub against the head in a slow tease.

“Can I—” Dean starts, and Cas nods furiously.

“Keep touching me,” he says, breathless. “Please.”

Dean’s knees hit the tile hard enough to bruise, but the feeling of Cas’ hands in his hair distracts him from the pain.
He tugs the pajamas down just far enough to free Cas’ cock, and is almost embarrassed by how hard the sight makes him. It’s flushed pink, the head glistening wet with arousal. Cas stares down at him, his hands pressing hard against the sink behind him. Cas’ gaze holds Dean’s. Without looking away, Dean strips them off completely and tosses them away.

Cas is completely naked from the waist down, but he’s still wearing the thin, gray v-neck. It’s hitched up a little at his waist to expose the tan skin of his stomach. His legs are thick and muscular. Dean hardly knows where to start.

Watching Cas’ face, Dean drags his fingernails up Cas’ shins, down his thighs, skirting the dark curl of hair at his groin. Cas’ hips shift at the sensation, restless, and Dean gives in to the urge to follow the path with his lips, licking and sucking at his sweat-damp skin.

“Taste like fuckin’ heaven,” he mutters without thinking, his mouth dragging over Cas’ hip. Cas starts laughing, and the motion of it makes his stomach shake. Dean presses his face against it to hide his embarrassed grin, and damn near purrs when Cas’s hand finds it’s way into his hair, stroking him.

“Don’t laugh at me,” Dean mutters.

“You make me very happy, Dean,” Cas says, and when Dean risks a glance up he can see him smiling wider than ever before. “Laughter is unavoidable.”

“Hmm,” Dean says, and maintains eye contact as he closes his fist around Cas’s cock.

Cas gasps, his hips shifting forward in an involuntary spasm.

“That feel okay?” Dean asks, and Cas sucks his lower lip into his mouth, then slowly releases it from between his teeth.

“Very,” Cas says. “I feel like… it’s like…”

“Like what, Cas? Describe it to me.”

“You’ve done this before, Dean,” Cas says, sounding frustrated at Dean’s insistence that he talk right now. “You know what it feels like.”

“I don’t know what it feels like to you,” Dean tells him, turning his head to press his lips his thigh, over and over.

Cas doesn’t answer right away, and Dean doesn’t ask again. He just works his hand slowly. Squeezing and releasing. Catching the wetness at the tip and smoothing it down as Cas swallows hard, throat clicking in the quiet room. Dean bites down on the soft skin of his thigh, then kisses the pink mark he leaves behind.

“It feels like... in the morning, when it’s cold and you bring me coffee,” Cas murmurs, and Dean watches him trying to put words to sensations. “The way the mug warms my hands. That moment. The moment when my hands touch the mug, the split second of new heat, but... sustained. Or... the moment before that, when I know I’m about to feel warmth, the moment before-- before--”

Dean squeezes the base of his cock a little tighter so he doesn’t come too soon, and Cas lets out a pitiful whine, desperate and keening. He’s shining, skin damp, his hair sticking to his forehead in dark curls.

“I’ve never done this,” Dean says quietly, and Cas regains enough clarity to blink down at him.
“Been with a guy, I mean. I’ve wanted to, but...”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah,” Dean nods. “Yeah, I like it.”

“Me too.”

“Couldn’t tell.” Dean says wryly, and quickens the motion of his hand, watching how every slight twist makes Cas’s stomach tense in pleasure. He’s slick, now, and the sound of Dean’s fist as it slides over wet skin is obscene. Dean licks his lips. Sucks the lower one between his teeth before looking up to meet Cas’s eyes. “Haven’t done this before, either.”

With his hand he guides Cas toward his mouth and lets the tip rest on his lips for a moment, just to feel the heat of him. Tastes him, bittersweet and salty, and can’t help but dart out his tongue. Cas’ hands tighten on the sink as his knees wobble.

“Dean,” he breathes.

The tremble in his voice makes Dean want more, and he sinks forward, taking Cas into his mouth as deep as he can.

When he lets his eyes travel back up Cas’ body, he finds Cas staring down with his mouth hanging slack, his eyes dark and heavily lidded. He pulls back slowly before sinking forward again, and Cas’ hand comes forward to touch his face, tracing the shape of himself through Dean’s cheek before sliding his thumb to the corner of Dean’s mouth where it’s stretched around him. He sinks his thumb into Dean’s mouth alongside his cock, and lets out a guttural noise that makes Dean throb.

“I didn’t know--” Cas says, his voice strained as he slides his thumb back out and drags it down Dean’s lip to his chin. Dean pulls off completely and grips him in a loose fist again, pumping it up and down until Cas cries out and comes, knees locked and head thrown back in rapture.

Dean looks from his face to the mess dripping down over his hand and wrist, still pulsing from Cas’ cock, and leans forward for a taste. The gentle touch of Dean’s mouth makes Cas’ entire body jerk from overstimulation.

“I’m so,” he slurs, hands weak where they push into Dean’s hair and curl into loose fists. “Please. Dean. Just.”

Dean stands on shaky legs, and Cas kisses him, hard and gasping. It’s hard to believe it’s only the second time he’s done it.

Sliding his hands up under the back of Cas’ t-shirt, Dean rocks forward, grinding against Cas’ thigh as he kisses him.

“Bed?” Dean asks.

Cas nods, pushing lightly at his chest until Dean starts walking backward. He falls back when he feels the mattress against the back of his knees, and Cas spares a moment to yank Dean’s t-shirt up over his head. Dean grins and wriggles his hips. Cas lets out a laugh, one hand resting on Dean’s thigh, fingertips disappearing under the edge of his boxers.

“Love that laugh,” Dean tells him, unguarded. “Took me too damn long to hear it, but now I wanna hear it daily.”
“That can be arranged.”

Cas leans down to kiss him just below the navel as he he pulls the boxers free. He touches Dean’s cock with the tip of his finger, tracing the vein on the underside as he watches for Dean’s reaction. Dean arches off the bed. The touch itself was featherlight and inconsequential, but knowing that it’s Cas who’s looking at him like that has Dean on the edge already.

“C’mere,” he says, reaching. Cas does.

Dean pulls him in, gasping against his mouth when Cas straddles his thighs and Dean’s cock slides into the crease of his ass. He can’t help but rock upward, suddenly aching to be inside Cas. To feel him everywhere. His hands catch on Cas’ t-shirt again, and he tugs at it until Cas pulls it off.

“You’re gorgeous,” Dean says, trailing his fingertips over Cas’ skin. The words are like cold water.

Cas stiffens, his expression hurt. Dean feels sick with the sudden thought that he’s fucked up in a monumental way. That Cas didn’t want any of this. He pulls his hands away.

“What’s wrong? What did I do?”

“Nothing.”

Cas smiles when he says it, but it’s nothing like the smile from a few minutes ago, and he shifts from his place on top of Dean to the mattress beside him.

His shoulders are tense. Dean wants to touch him, to soothe him. He’s afraid that it won’t be allowed.

“Cas. Talk to me.”

For a long moment, Cas doesn’t make a sound. When he does, his voice is quiet and shaded with what sounds a lot like regret.

“This isn’t me.”

Dean frowns.

“What?”

“I know you think you’re being complimentary, but… this isn’t me. You say I’m gorgeous but you can’t even… you’ve never seen me, Dean. Not really.”

“Cas, I—”

“God may have given me this shape when he brought me back, and it’s mine, wholly, but… this was still Jimmy’s face first. It makes me feel… secondary. Like you’d just as soon be kissing him as kissing me.”

“Cas, you’ve gotta know that’s not true.”

“Knowing it and feeling it are two different things.”

“But you’re not-- I mean, Jimmy was an attractive guy. No two ways about it. But he moved different. Carried himself different,” Dean reaches out, settling his hand on Cas’ shoulder and squeezing. “You do those things and it’s like. Fuck, Cas. It’s everything.”
Cas almost looks like he believes him.

“And I doubt he’d look good in the cowboy belt,” Dean adds with a wink.

Cas narrows his eyes.

“You constantly make fun of my belt,” he says. A pause. “You like my belt?”

Dean wriggles his eyebrows. Cas lets out a quiet laugh and rubs his hand over his face.

“It’s you I’m into,” Dean tugs Cas’ hand away from his face to make him meet Dean’s eye. “Trust me on that.”

“I’m sorry,” Cas says.

“For what?”

“I ‘ruined the moment’.”

He uses airquotes. They’re both stark naked, Cas’ thighs are sticky with come, and he’s using airquotes. He’s ridiculous. Dean loves him so much that he wants to scream.

“You didn’t ruin a goddamn thing,” Dean promises him, sliding down until he’s pressed against his back. He wraps his arm around him, kissing his shoulder.

“But you didn’t even—”

“Cas, seriously. It’s fine. I’m glad you told me. I don’t want to fuck this up, but my track record is shit, so you’ve gotta tell me if I’m about to.”

“You’re not going to fuck this up,” Cas says.

Dean smirks at the sound of him cursing. He squeezes him a little tighter.

“I’ve wanted this for years,” he admits.

“I haven’t,” Cas says. Dean barks out a laugh.

“Wow, thanks. Stroke my ego, why don’t you.”

Cas huffs and leans up onto his elbows to look at him.

“I mean... before, when I was still an angel. I knew I cared for you more than anyone, but it was... I didn't have desires like this. Or... I did, but none that I could understand. It's a little like food.”

“How do you mean?”

“As an angel, I could see all the parts but it made the whole more difficult to comprehend. So I knew I wanted to be near you and to help you in whatever way I could. I knew I felt more... steady when I was with you. I knew that the desire to be close to you was both an emotional and a physical thing, and that the few fleeting touches we’d had in moments of distress were never quite enough. I knew that I longed to know the taste of your mouth, what your hands might feel like if they touched me intimately. I knew I wanted you to see me, truly see me. I knew... I knew a lot of things. I didn't understand how they related to one another. Even when I fell, it took a while for me to understand it. So for me, it's been something I've wanted, actively, for around a year. How long have you—”
“Purgatory. That's when I knew for sure that I was… how I felt about you. But I definitely... there were definitely inklings before,” Dean chews his lip for a moment and huffs out a laugh. “Remember the night before we tracked Raphael down in Maine?”

“Dean, that was six years ago.”

“Yeah.”

“You paid a strange woman to have sex with me.”

“I was confused, okay? Back then there was a lot of shit I still hadn’t worked out about myself, and you're, y’know... dude-shaped. I wanted to get in your pants, and it freaked me out.”

Cas lets out a small laugh against Dean’s shoulder.

“I expect I would have ‘freaked out’ too, if you’d told me then.”

“Yeah. But I mean, I wanted to jump your bones but I wasn’t... I didn’t start feeling this,” he curls his hand around Cas’s, bringing it to rest against his chest and squeezing, “until it seemed like it was too late. After the Leviathan. When you walked into that lake.”

“I’m sorry,” Cas murmurs.

“I know,” Dean tells him. “Me too. But we’re good now, right?”

“Yes,” Cas says.

“Good.”

“While we're confessing to things,” Cas says quietly, lips tickling-soft against Dean's collarbone, “can I tell you something?”

“Anything.”

“I don't like pie.”

“Get the fuck out of my bed.”

Cas huffs out a laugh, and Dean frowns against his hair even as he pulls him closer, arm wrapped around his shoulders.

“I don't like pie,” he mutters. “You're the worst person I've ever met.”
Dean knows he should be asleep. His body is aching in all the best ways, and he feels that bone-deep sense of lingering calm that comes after amazing sex, but try as he might he can’t stop thinking about the Imbine.

She hadn’t wanted them before, despite having had multiple chances to snatch them up, so what if she still doesn’t in the morning? What if, despite Charlie’s rain spell to summon her, she merely passes them over again?

It’s been more than a week since the couple went missing, and though the Ortegas were gone for years before they turned up, there’s no guarantee that Andre and Lauren are still okay.

Cas is snoring quietly, his arm draped over Dean’s waist as he curls against him. His hair smells like honey. Dean breathes the scent in as he skips his fingertips over Cas’ arm. Cas sucks in a breath, startled awake by the sensation.

“What’s wrong, baby?”

“Sorry,” Dean whispers.

“Why are you awake?”

Dean shrugs.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he admits. Cas’ expression grows guarded.

“What? Is it--”

“I’m not freaking out,” Dean tells him, quick to stop that worry in its tracks. “I’m just thinking about the case.”

“Oh.”

Cas lies back down, shifting until his stubbled cheek is resting on Dean’s collarbone. His fingers tickle lightly over Dean’s side.

“We’ve got no guarantee that she’s going to take us,” Dean says after a moment. “She didn’t want us before, remember? What if she turns up and just... leaves again?”

“I don’t think she will.”

“We were unhappy before,” Cas says simply. “Or... not unhappy, exactly. But though we may have shared the same feelings for one another, we each thought ourselves alone. She could likely tell that something was wrong. Now, we’re exactly what she wants.”

“I guess it’s a good thing she wasn’t a Croi Bhriste,” Dean says after a moment. “She would have sensed our issues a mile away.”

“I expect we wouldn’t have made it past the ferry.” He shifts away from Dean slightly, pushing up onto his elbow to check time before he looks back at Dean. “We still have a few hours until we need to get up.”
Dean recognizes that tone. That look in Cas’ eye. It’s the same one he used when he told Dean what would happen if he put a demon in the same room as a prophet. It makes his heart race.

“You trying to tell me somethin’, Cas?’

Cas only smirks and slides his hand between Dean’s legs. It doesn’t take long for Cas to stroke him to hardness, and Dean rolls onto his side, facing Cas as he returns the favor.

It’s Cas’ idea to try to hold them both together, but there’s too much friction, so Dean licks Cas’ palm. When he wraps it back around them Dean moans, low. The slide of spit-slick skin is perfect.

Dean strokes one hand down over Cas’ thigh, around to the back of his knee, hitching it up over his own hip as he pulls Cas on top of him. Looking down, he watches their cocks thrust through Cas’ loose fist.

“Fuck, that’s-- like that, Cas,” Dean sighs.

He drops his head back against the pillow, rocking his hips up in a slow rhythm. His hands roam, wandering up and down Cas’ sides, cataloguing all the spots that make Cas’ breath hitch.

He sucks two fingers into his mouth, teasing Cas’ nipples until they stiffen, and then skims the same wet fingers down the cleft of his ass to tease at his rim. He presses in, just a little, and Cas groans. His hips stutter when Dean takes his fingers away. He looks at Dean like he’s offended.

“Do that again,” he says.

“Next time,” Dean promises, squeezing his ass and bringing his other hand down to join Cas’ where it’s still stroking them together. “Need lube.”

Cas makes a quiet noise of begrudging acceptance and strokes them a little faster. He stops looking offended after a few more seconds. Dean’s toes curl at the sight of him coming, and it’s enough to send him over the edge right after.

As Cas tugs the blanket back up over them, Dean thinks he could very easily get used to this.

***

Summer or not, it’s cold by the water, and Dean tucks his hands under his arms as he steps out from the trees onto the pebbles. The iron blade tucked into the back of his jeans is icy against his skin. He wills it to warm up a little quicker.

Coming to a stop beside him, Cas trails his hand down Dean’s shoulder to his elbow. He pulls gently until Dean gives in and lets his hand fall to his side for Cas to take. Dean smiles at the now familiar touch. They’ve held hands countless times this week, but this is the first time they’ve done so without pretense.

“How long do we have?” Cas wonders aloud, and Dean glances at his watch.

“Assuming Charlie started on time, we’ve got about four minutes. Why?”

“It’s cold,” Cas says.

“Mm,” Dean agrees, and the tug on his hand is all the warning he gets before he’s being maneuvered around and pressed back against one of the trees. Cas’ mouth is warm and soft. He tastes like peppermint toothpaste, and Dean thinks it tastes better than usual in the form of Cas’
kisses.

“Is this okay?” Cas asks, pulling back slightly, and Dean just nods before dragging him back.

“Stupid question,” he mutters, curling his free hand against Cas’ side.

It feels like they’ve barely been kissing for a minute when Dean feels the first drops of rain, and he opens his eyes. On the lake’s shore, he can see the shimmering glow of the Imbine emerging from the water.

“We’ve got company,” Dean murmurs against Cas’ lips, pressing one more kiss to them before he lets himself meet the Imbine’s eye. Dean senses the surge of power when she targets them, even through the hexbag. It’s like a brewing thunderstorm.

“I see her,” Cas says after a moment, and glances back at Dean. “Do you feel that?”

Dean nods and squeezes his hand.

She tilts her head as she considers them, and like the first time Dean saw her, he’s struck by how beautiful she is. How deadly. He’s not sure if it’s just because he knows what she is, or because the protective hexbags are distorting her magic, but there’s nothing appealing about her beauty now. It’s like he can tell it’s just a veneer, and he’s afraid of what lies beneath.

Moving slowly, Dean takes a step toward her, and she shifts her gaze from him to Cas. When he follows Dean’s lead, she smiles.

The water parts where the Imbine stands, absorbing the pale green light that seems to come from her skin, and she turns to descend. With Cas’ hand gripped tightly in his, Dean follows her her down, down, down.

Beneath their feet, the lake’s floor is slippery with algae and rotting wood. The Imbine floats ahead, beckoning. Behind them, above them, the lake slowly fills in the empty space until they’re in a shifting tunnel of air. It’s dark, only the dim glow of the Imbine lighting their way. Dean doesn’t dare let go of Cas.
“We should have brought scuba gear,” Dean whispers when the sky is completely obscured by water, and Cas just squeezes his hand.

As they walk, Dean counts in his head. It’s eighty-two paces until they reach her bower. His ears pop uncomfortably.

The bower is nothing but a huge bubble of air. It shimmers like an oil slick as they get closer, and when they step inside the whole space seems to shudder. Dean has the troubling feeling that it might burst at any moment.

The Imbine slips back out into the water almost as soon as they arrive, and they watch as she glides
around the edges, her glow lighting up the seaweed and fallen branches that cover the lake’s floor. The bubble wobbles around them.

Dean lets out a slow, shaky breath.

“What do you think she’s doing?”

“Checking the perimeter,” Cas guesses, and steps a little further into the bubble. There’s a pile of old rags and blankets on the ground, and he points out a drawing peeking out from beneath them. Flowers, from what Dean can tell, etched into the stone of the lakebed.

“So you think Lauren drew that?” Cas asks.

Dean makes his way closer, shoving the rags aside to get a closer look. When he does, he finds a velvet-covered ring box.

“I’d say yes,” Dean says. Picking it up, he opens it to see a simple rose-gold ring, set with a single glittering stone. “And this is probably the ring Andre was going to give her.”

Dean puts it into his jacket pocket and looks around for anything else that might help them.

“That’s good. They aren’t here, so the Imbine must have let them go.”

“Which means we’re free to ice her,” Dean says, pushing back to his feet and looking around. “Just as soon as she gets back.”

While they wait, Dean makes his way around the bubble, looking for any other signs of previous victims. He falters when he sees something in the water outside. A wrinkled hand, fingers spread wide. The rest of the body is impossible to see; the water too dark and murky. Grim-faced, Dean glances at Cas and nods his head toward it. Now they know why no couple was found when the Imbine took the Ortegas. Who knows how long she’d had the previous couple, but evidently she only replaced them when they passed away.

Or, Dean realizes with a sick feeling in his throat, one of them died and the other stopped being of use to her. He looks a little more closely, but can’t make out a second body. He resolves to scour the missing persons records after they get out, just to put his mind at ease.

“Do you think she--” Cas starts, but cuts himself off when they see the Imbine through the water, moving swiftly toward them.

Dean pulls his blade out just before she bursts through the bubble, landing without a sound.

Up close, Dean realizes that her eyes are slightly too big for her face, wide and glassy like a doll. The sight makes him shudder. When he does, her eyes narrow slightly, and she darts sharply forward, baring her needle teeth and hissing at the sight of his weapon.

Any illusion of beauty has well and truly been shattered.

Dean can’t help but try to angle himself in front of Cas; Cas, naturally, is attempting to do the same to him.

The imbine eyes them both with interest. Her sneer slowly reshapes into a rictus grin.

She doesn’t speak, and Dean wonders if it’s through lack of desire to or if she just doesn’t know their language. Then again, he thinks maybe she doesn’t need to. He understands what she’s
thinking just from the look on her face. She can see that they want to protect one another, and the knowledge of that excites her.

She lifts one hand, the long nails glinting, and jerks it toward Cas. When nothing happens, she does it again.

“Sorry, Stella,” Dean says, slipping the hexbag from his pocket and wriggling it. “Looks like we stole your groove.”

The Imbine falls for the taunt, darting forward to grab him, and Dean uses the attack to his advantage, twisting in place and sinking the blade into her side. It splits her skin with a hiss like water on a hot skillet. She jerks away, screeching. The blood seeping from her side is deep green, almost black.

Her eyes widen as she touches it. She staggers.

The bubble collapses as she falls. Cas’ hand closes around Dean’s wrist, and Dean just manages to take a breath before they’re engulfed by crashing water.

Frantically, they swim upward, chasing the sunrise to the surface, and burst through it breathless and gasping. The lake’s surface glitters.

“You okay?” Dean asks as soon as he can manage, and Cas just nods, sucking in another breath.

“You?”

“I’m fine,” Dean tells him. “But we’re not swimming again for a few years at least.”

***

They’re close to the shore when they finally see Andre and Lauren, huddled under a tree on the edge of the beach. Lauren is holding her boyfriend, cradling him against her chest and kissing the crown of his head as she visibly holds back tears.

Dean reaches out to grab hold of Cas’ arm, slowing his approach. He’s wary of spooking them.

“Hey,” he says, soft as he can get away with, and they both look up sharply. Dean spreads his palms. “She’s gone, it’s okay.”

“You-- how did you--”

“Not our first time.”

“You alright?” Cas asks.

“We’re okay,” Lauren nods, but Andre is shaking, his eyes pressed closed. When she sees the question in Dean’s eyes, she swallows. “Andre’s a vet. He… he went through some stuff on his last tour. Being in captivity again, it… it hit him pretty hard.”

“I’m going to go call island security,” Dean says. “I’ll get some help down here, okay?”

“Thank you,” Lauren says.

“Cas, you want to stay here? Make sure they’re okay, maybe fill them in?”

“Of course,” Cas says, and Dean touches his shoulder in thanks. Before he can leave, Cas slips his
hand around the back of his neck and pulls him into a brief kiss. “I’ll be here.”

“’kay,” Dean says, squeezing his arm.

Dean’s lungs are burning by the time he makes it up to main street, but as soon as he’s alerted security he turns and runs back down. Two security guards follow him, along with the nurse from the island’s small medical center. Dean’s relieved to see Andre looks a little more calm when they arrive.

While the nurse checks them over, Dean and Cas wait off to the side, wrapped in blankets.

“We’ve contacted the police,” the taller of the two guards tells them as the other crouches down to speak to Lauren and Andre. “They’ll be here in half an hour. They asked that both of you remain nearby for questioning.”

“Yeah, no problem,” Dean tells him.

***

After almost an hour of questioning from the police, Dean and Cas are finally cleared to return to their cabin. Slipping his hand into his pocket, Dean touches the ring box. He glances over toward Andre and Lauren, sitting on the other side of the building as they wait for their ride off the island to arrive.

“Cas, can you do me a favor?”

“Anything,” Cas says.

Dean bumps him with his shoulder.

“It’s just a small one,” he grins. “Can you distract Lauren for a minute? I’ve gotta give Andre’s ring back, and I don’t want to ruin the surprise if he never got to ask her.”

Cas sweeps his hand over Dean’s lower back and nods. Dean smiles his thanks before they head over. He’s relieved to see that Andre looks more or less relaxed now, though his grip on Lauren’s hand is white-knuckle tight.

“You two doing okay?” Dean asks them.

Lauren nods.

“Yeah,” she says. “But I’m still… Are you sure it won’t come back?”

Dean glances at Cas, who moves to sit beside her listening to her concerns, and once she’s fully preoccupied Dean clears his throat to get Andre’s attention. He looks up at Dean.

“I think I found something of yours,” Dean says quietly.

Andre furrows his brow, and Dean digs the box out of his pocket. He slips it into Andre’s hand. Andre pops the box open before glancing back up at Dean and clicking it shut. He smiles, eyes a little watery.

“Thanks,” he says. “It was my Gran’s, this is… it means a lot.”

“Don’t mention it.”
For a few more minutes, Dean waits while Cas explains basic protective symbols and hexbags to Lauren, and when she’s finally satisfied that she’ll remember, he holds out his hand. Cas takes it, waving to the couple, and they walk back toward their cabin. It’s already nearing three o’clock.

There are a dozen text messages and missed calls on Dean’s cell when they arrive, each more frantic than the next. Dean sends a message to all three concerned parties and fires up Skype. They squeeze side by side on the love seat, the laptop balanced between them.

“How’d it go?” Sam asks as soon as the video call connects.

“All good,” Dean says, and in their little windows, Sam, Kevin and Charlie all slump with relief. “Andre and Lauren should be getting airlifted out of here any minute now. They’re pretty shaken up, but they’re okay.”

“And you guys?” Charlie asks.

“Damp, but otherwise good,” Dean says.

“Not a plesiosaur in sight,” Cas adds. Charlie grins at him.

“Is the Imbine--” Kevin starts, and Dean nods.

“Dead,” Dean says.

“So we’re done,” Charlie says. “Unless there’s any other loose ends to tie up?”

“Actually, there is something,” Dean says. “While we were down there, we uh… well. We saw what was left of the last couple before the Ortegas.”

“Oh god,” Charlie says, a look of horror on her face.

“Yeah, it wasn’t pretty,” Dean agrees. “But, um. There was only one body. I was just wondering if there was anything in any of your notes about--”

“Yes!” Charlie says. “I remember seeing an article about a woman who turned up the day after they went missing, but she was alone so I figured the story was unrelated.”

“Was she okay?”

“I think it said something about her daughter taking her home,” Charlie says. “She was in her sixties when she turned up. She and her husband had been missing for something like fifteen years.”

“Well, at least she got out,” Dean says. Cas’ hand drops to his knee and squeezes, and Dean casts a grateful smile to him before turning back to the screen to find Charlie giving him a pointed look. Sam and Kevin are unsurprisingly oblivious. “Uh, so. What’s the plan, now? We’re booked in until tomorrow, so--”

“Don’t worry, nobody’s gonna take away your last night in paradise,” Sam says with a good-natured roll of the eyes. “I’m gonna drive the rest of the way back today, and Charlie and I will pick you guys up tomorrow as planned.”

“Awesome,” Dean says.

“You guys better make use of your vacation day,” Charlie says.
Dean fights off the blush that he can feel crawling up his neck.

“Oh, we will,” he says.

They sign off soon after, and Dean stretches, cracking his neck as he looks over at Cas.

“Any ideas for today?”

“Yes,” Cas says

Dean widens his eyes at him when he doesn’t elaborate.

“You gonna share?”

Tilting his head to rest on the back of the loveseat, Cas smiles at him. He taps his fingers lightly over Dean’s thigh.

“I have to make a call to the activities desk first,” he says. “Go take a shower, and then I’ll tell you.”

“Or,” Dean counters, catching hold of Cas’ hand and squeezing it. “We go take a shower, and then you call the activities desk.”

Cas smirks.

“That sounds wonderful, but it’s not the plan.”

“Then the plan clearly sucks,” Dean laughs.

Leaning in, Cas kisses Dean deeply, with intent, before pulling slightly away.

“Go take a shower,” he repeats.

Dean slumps against the cushions, and Cas smiles at him before he stands and heads for the phone. He doesn’t pick it up until Dean leaves the room.

***

Cas is sitting on the edge of their bed when Dean comes out of the bathroom.

“Avery spoke to me while you were being interviewed by the police,” he says, watching Dean scrub his hair with a towel.

“Uh-huh…”

“She said the resort wanted to express their deepest gratitude for our help today, and offered us a complimentary activity of our choice.”

Dean lifts his brow.

“So what did you choose?

“You’ll find out in ten minutes.” Cas stands and slides his belt free of the loops. He drops it into his bag. “I think you’ll be happy with my selection.”

“Sweetheart, I’d be happy with just about anything if you told me about it while you’re doing that.” Dean tells him, eyes tracking the movement of Cas’ fingers over the fly of his jeans. Cas lifts
his brow and slowly untucks his shirt. Dean stares at the flash of skin, his mouth dry.

“I still don’t like pie,” Cas says, and pulls his shirt off before shutting the bathroom door.

“You’re such an ass,” Dean says.

He can hear Cas laughing at him through the wall.

***

The massage parlor is on main street beside the general store, and Dean pulls their cart into the last remaining parking space out front. He eyes the general store before he glances at Cas.

“So,” he starts.

Cas tilts his head.

“I don’t wanna just assume anything,” Dean says, rubbing at the back of his neck. “But, uh… if you still…”

“Dean, just go buy the lubricant.”

“Shit,” Dean laughs, scrubbing at his face with both hands. “Yeah, okay. I’ll meet you inside?”

With an amused smile, Cas nods, and Dean ducks into the general store. He tries not to feel like an awkward teenager when he makes his single purchase, but it’s still a losing battle, even now. He’d always thought that feeling would go away, and yet here he is in his thirties, embarrassed to be buying lube.

When he makes his way next door a minute later, a massage therapist is waiting for him. He smiles.

“Are you Dean?” he asks.

“That’s me.”

“Your partner is in room two,” he says. “Go ahead and make yourself comfortable, and we’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

Dean gives him a little nod and heads down the hall, knocking before he pushes open the door.

“Just me,” he says.

Cas is already lying on one of the massage tables, and he looks over his shoulder when Dean walks in.

“I already love this massage,” Dean tells him. Cas laughs and puts his head back down, and it’s not long before Dean’s in the same position.

The two therapists are quiet when they come in, barely speaking except to announce the introduction of some new element. The hot stones are possibly the best thing that’s ever happened to Dean’s back, and judging by the sound that Cas makes when they’re applied to him, he definitely agrees.

Dean’s pretty content after the first twenty minutes, but as relaxing as it is, having someone else rub him down just makes Dean want Cas again.
All Dean can think about as the massage therapist works out the knots in his shoulders is that his hands aren’t Cas’, and God, he wants Cas’ hands on him again. One night with the guy and he’s already addicted.

He looks over at Cas, stretched out on the other table, and wonders if it would be bad form to just get up and drag him back to their cabin.

Cas turns his head as if he can feel Dean looking at him, and Dean just keeps on staring. It’s not long before it starts to feel like he’s being issued a challenge. Cas’ mouth twitches into a barely-there smile, and Dean bites down on the inside of his cheek to keep himself from grinning like an idiot.

He’s putty by the time the massage therapists step outside, and getting up from the table seems like a special kind of torture.

“How do you feel?” Cas asks him, and Dean just watches him slip into a white robe.

“Mm,” Dean says.

“You have to get up so we can use the sauna.”

“Mm,” he says again, and closes his eyes.

Cas walks over, lightly trailing his fingers over the side of Dean’s neck before leaning down and kissing him.

“And after the sauna we’ll go to dinner,” he says, kissing him again. “And then we’ll go to bed.”

Dean opens his eyes again, leaning up to chase after Cas’ lips.

“I take back what I said about the plan.”

***

Their usual table is taken when they make their way into Bon Vivant, and they find themselves in a quiet little corner. It’s kind of nice. Private.

In a weird way, it feels like a first date. Cas smiles when Dean tells him so.

“In that case, we’ve probably done a lot of things in the wrong order,” Cas says.

Dean thinks about that, and laughs.

“Yeah, it’s kind of a messed up pattern, right? First I died, then we met, then you gave me the ‘Property of Castiel’ mark, then--”

“The what?” Cas asks with a frown.

Smirking, Dean points to his shoulder.

“The handprint, Cas.”

Cas’ eyes go wide and horrified.

“That wasn’t-- I didn’t mean to do that. I don’t consider you my property, Dean. I never--”
The look on Cas’ face alone makes Dean wish he’d never made the joke. He winces, reaching out to grab his hand where it rests on the table.

“Hey, Cas, I was kidding.”

Cas stares at him for a long moment, as though looking for signs that Dean’s not kidding at all, but he finally relaxes.

“It was an accident,” he says, turning his hand to lace their fingers together. “I’m still not sure how it happened. I wasn’t even in a vessel at the time.”

“No harm done, Cas,” Dean says. “It was actually…”

He trails off, unsure of how to word his feelings about the handprint. Unsure if he should even try.

“It was what?” Cas prompts.

“I dunno… it grounded me, sometimes. Reminded me I was really back. That I’d really been saved.” He shrugs. Cas looks too conflicted about what he’s saying, and Dean hates that he’s responsible for it. He sends him a wink to lighten the mood. “And that you’d put your hot little hands on me.”

Cas lets out an undignified snort just in time for a waiter to arrive with their meals, and they fall quiet as they eat.

Or--Cas eats. Dean just watches Cas’s hands. His long, elegant fingers; his wide, masculine palms. The thoughts Dean had in the massage parlor all come flooding back, and after the handprint conversation there’s a whole other layer to them. Cas’ hands touching him. Cas’ hands holding him. Cas’ hands marking him.

“Are you alright?” Cas asks him as he crosses his knife and fork on the empty plate, and Dean drags his gaze back up to his face.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You seem distracted. You’ve seemed distracted ever since the food came out.” With a tilt of his chin, he indicates Dean’s half-finished meal. “You’ve barely touched your burger.”

“Not hungry I guess,” Dean lies. “You ready to go?”

Cas studies him for a moment before understanding flashes in his eyes, and he leans forward.

“Are you thinking about--”

“Shh,” Dean tells him, glancing around at the other tables, before ducking forward to whisper. “Yeah, okay? I can’t help it. We opened the freaking floodgates. And then you were all ‘I have a plan’ and I’m fucking weak, okay?”

Cas’s mouth lifts a little at one side and Dean glowers at him.

“Stop looking so smug,” he says.

“Sorry,” Cas tells him, but he’s still smiling. The asshole isn’t sorry at all. He lifts his hand and rubs at his lower lip as though trying to pull the smile away, and all it does is make Dean look at his fingers again.
“Alright, let’s go,” Dean pulls the linen napkin from his lap and tosses it on the table, standing. Cas stares at him.

“I was going to have dessert,” he says.

Dean opens his mouth then clicks his jaw shut and does not almost offer to be Cas’s dessert. He does not. A thought is meaningless until acted on and nobody can prove a damn thing.

Something in his expression must say it anyway, because Cas pushes to his feet without another word and heads for the door.

***

They don’t turn on the light in their cabin.

As soon as the door is closed, Dean catches hold of Cas’s hand and brings it to his mouth, pressing his lips over the knuckles and letting his tongue dart out. He can taste salt, some remnant of the sweet potato fries Cas ate at dinner, and before he’s considered exactly how obscene it is he’s sucked the length of his index finger entirely into his mouth.

Cas’s breath is punched out of him, a low huff. Dean drags his tongue around his finger, scraping over it with his teeth as he raises his eyes. In the dark, he can just make out the shape of Cas’s partly open mouth; the way his eyes track each movement of Dean’s lips.

Cas pulls his hand back until Dean releases his finger with a wet pop, and then he’s crowding Dean against the door, his tongue sliding into his mouth as he presses against him from hip to chest, his fist loosely curled between them against Dean’s collarbone.

Cas rocks against Dean, and Dean groans at the friction. He groans louder when it disappears.

When Cas flicks the light on, he looks wrecked. His hair messier than usual. Dean pushes his hands into it and drags him into another kiss.

“What were you thinking about at dinner?” Cas asks when Dean lets him go.

“You.”

“Specifically,” Cas says, tracing his finger tip up Dean’s stomach, lifting his shirt a little in the process, his nail scratching over Dean’s skin. “Describe what you were thinking about.”

Dean feels his face growing hot.

“Are you seriously angling for dirty talk here, Cas?”

“If that’s what it’s called,” Cas says, and undoes the lowest button on Dean’s shirt. “You seemed very… distracted. If you describe it to me, perhaps I can try to do it.”

Cas undoes the next button, then stops. Waits. Dean swallows.

“What about them?”

Dean catches one, tracing over Cas’s fingers.

“Touching me.”
“How?” Cas asks, spreading his fingers against Dean’s. Dean licks his lower lip.

“Pinning me down,” he says in a breathy rush, and closes his eyes as he leans his head back against the door. “Holding my hands down while, um… While you…”

“While I what, Dean?”


For some reason, asking for what he wants is goddamned impossible, even when he’s being told to do it. Dean takes a shaky breath.

“Tell me,” Cas murmurs, leaning in close to mouth at his jaw. “What do you want me to do?”

“Whatever you want,” Dean says.

Cas bites him, soft. Dean whines.

“Tell me, my love,” Cas repeats.

“Everything,” Dean gasps out. “I want everything. Kiss me. Want your hands all over me. Want to fuck and be fucked and I wanna feel you for days, Cas. Want to taste every inch of you, I-- whatever you want to do I want to do it. I just want to feel you, everywhere. Any way I can. I want to make you feel so good, make you glad you fell. I--”

Cas kisses him hard and fast.

“I’ll give you everything,” Cas tells him. “You just have to let me.”

He pulls away then, stepping backward without dropping Dean’s gaze, and Dean can’t do a damn thing but follow him into the bedroom. Cas has him on his back in seconds, and Dean’s heart pounds. He’s never been in a position to be manhandled before, and fuck he likes it.

Cas slips his palm down Dean’s chest, working his shirt open as he goes.

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Cas slips his palm down Dean’s chest, working his shirt open as he goes.

“I definitely like my hands touching you,” he says, and leans down to kiss Dean before pulling back and holding Dean against the mattress when he tries to follow. “Pinning you down…” he frowns. “I’m not sure about pinning you down.”

He ducks closer, lips just out of reach. Dean strains against his hands until Cas gives the inch he needs to make contact.

“Though I see the appeal,” Cas admits.

“Fuck,” Dean laughs, breathless. Cas grins down at him. “What happened to doing everything out of order?”

“I’m trying to be thorough.”

Cas moves his hands to Dean’s shoulders, pulling his shirt free before getting to work on his own. Dean leans up to bat his hands away.

“That’s my job,” he says.

They make quick work of their shoes and clothes, and when they’re free of every stitch, Cas pushes Dean to lie back down. He hears the click of a plastic cap, and then Cas’ hands close
around him, slick and incredible. He works them both in tandem, one at the base and the other at the head. Squeezing, sliding, twisting as he drags each hand up and down to meet in the middle.

He’s focused completely on his task, sweat gathering in the dip of his collarbone. Dean wishes he was closer so he might lick it away. Then again--he drops his head back against the pillow and groans, hips lifting a little before Cas pushes them back down.

Leaving one hand to stroke Dean’s cock, he slides a fingertip over Dean’s perineum. He presses the sensitive skin just hard enough that Dean needs to rock against his hand, before dragging his finger further back to skirt Dean’s rim. And then he just leaves it there, dragging back and forth, just teasing until Dean feels himself nearing madness.

“Please,” Dean says, trying to press harder against the finger but still rock up into Cas’ hand.

For the first time since they started, Cas seems to take pity on him. He squeezes Dean’s knee with his other hand, kisses his shin, and slips the tip of his forefinger just past the rim. Dean sighs as he sinks it a little deeper.

“Oh,” Cas breathes, a strangely fascinated tone in his voice, like he’s just now realizing why Dean might have enjoyed doing this to him. He pulls his hand back, switching out his finger for his thumb, and repeats the motion. Against his stomach, Dean’s cock twitches, dripping.

Dean couldn’t stop himself from begging if he wanted to.

“Please,” he says. “Fuck, Cas. Castiel--”

Cas leans down and tongues at the head of Dean’s cock, lapping and sucking. He pulls his thumb free as he does, switching it out for two fingers, then three, that he sinks deep in a smooth motion. Before Dean knows it, he’s spilling into Cas’ mouth, and his fingers are gone, and Cas’ cock is pushing inside him.

He’s hot and thick, and Dean can barely think for how good he feels. He arches his back, digging the heel of one foot into the mattress as Cas finds his rhythm. Cas has his other leg raised high, his hand gripping the thigh and pushing it toward Dean’s chest to hold him open.

Every rock of Cas’ hips has Dean gasping.

Dean stares up at him, starry eyed. The tendons of Cas’ throat are strained tight, his skin slick with sweat, mouth half-open as he stares back down at Dean. He’s beautiful like this, Dean thinks. He’s beautiful all the damn time.

“Dean, I-- you,” Cas says, pulling almost all the way out before sliding home again, cockhead catching on Dean’s prostate and making him groan. His fingers work into Dean’s hair, pushing back over the crown of his head as he repeats the motion, again, again, each thrust a little harder, a little less measured. “You feel so--”

The sentence is fractured with his movement, and Cas holds completely still, muscles taut with tension before he shudders violently and comes, cock pulsing hard where it’s still pressed deep. Dean’s hand grips his ass tight enough to bruise, holding him inside.

Dean pulls him down by the back of his head with his other hand, desperate for his mouth.

He’s not sure which of them is making that embarrassing noise but god he doesn’t care. If it means Cas is still buried inside him, his chest pressed to Dean’s, his racing pulse real and tangible under Dean’s hands, he’d gladly admit to it.
“I don’t want to leave,” he hears Cas saying distantly, and he doesn’t know if Cas means the resort or the warmth of his body, but either way his answer is the same.

“Neither do I.”
The ferry ride off the island feels faster than the ride there. Though Cas still looks a little green around the gills, he’s nowhere near as bad as he had been the first time.

An admittedly vain part of Dean wonders if it might have something to do with the way their hands are wound together on the bench between them.

“You doing okay there?” he asks, and smiles when Cas looks over at him with a tense jaw.

“Mm,” Cas replies, then immediately closes his eyes.

Dean rubs his thumb along the side of Cas’ palm.

“The dock is in sight,” he assures him.

He can already make out a few couples milling around, waiting for the boat to arrive and take them to the island.

“Mm,” Cas says again. Dean tries not to laugh.

His cell chimes as the boat comes to a stop, but he waits until they’ve both made their way through the waiting crowd before he pulls it from his pocket. It’s a text from Charlie.

“They’re running a little late,” he says as he shoots a message back. “Got stuck behind a camper van coming up the mountain. Gives us a few more minutes of alone time, so I’m not complaining.”

He gives Cas a wink, but Cas only nods and looks away, dropping his hand and sinking down onto a bench at the edge of the parking lot. Dean sits beside him.

“You still queasy?”

“No really.”

Still, it sounds like he’s pouting. After watching him for a moment, Dean stands, heading over to the vending machine by the check-in office door. There’s no ginger ale, so he settles for Sprite. It takes three attempts for the machine to accept his dollar bill.

When he gets back to the bench, he finds Cas with a furrowed brow, twisting the ring he’s been wearing all week around his finger.

“They were out of the ginger ale you like,” Dean says, holding out the bottle, and Cas looks up at him.

“Thank you,” he says, and his delivery is so stilted that Dean starts to feel something trembling and uncomfortable in his chest. He watches as Cas opens the bottle and takes a small sip before screwing the lid back on and putting it on top of his bag.

“You sure you’re feeling okay?” Dean asks him.

“I’m fine,” Cas insists. “I’m not queasy.”

Dean chews on the inside of his cheek.
“Then what is it?”

A muscle in Cas’ jaw twitches as he looks away, and Dean watches him take a breath. Deep, like he’s steeling himself for something unpleasant. It makes his stomach flip restlessly.

“It’s stuck,” Cas finally says with an apologetic frown, lifting his hand to show him the ring before he drops it back into his lap. Dean could laugh if Cas didn’t look so forlorn. “I know it’s important to you, and--”

“That’s what you’re pouting about?” he cuts him off, and Cas shifts from miserable to annoyed in an instant.

“I’m not pouting.”

Sitting back down beside him, Dean huffs through his nose as he reaches for his hand. He touches the ring with his thumb and forefinger, grazing over Cas’ knuckles before taking a deep breath and linking their fingers together.

“Keep it,” he says before he loses his nerve, still looking at their joined hands, and feels Cas tense beside him.

“It was your mother’s.”

“Yeah, well. Who else am I going to give it to?”

“Dean, I--”

“I mean, this isn’t like a proposal or anything,” Dean blurs out, though he’s painfully aware that in every way that counts, it basically is. “But, Cas, you’ve gotta know that I-- You’re-- There’s nobody else who could ever-- I mean. Fuck. You’re the only person I could even think about giving this to. I want this.” He forces himself to look up from their hands, meeting Cas’ eyes despite how scared he is of saying this. “I want us. For as long as you can stand to be around me.”

“I hope you don’t have plans for the next sixty or so years, then,” Cas says. “Because I don’t intend to leave your side as long as we’re alive.”

Dean lifts his free hand to cover his eyes.

“Why do you have to say shit like that?”

“Because it’s true,” Cas says, tugging Dean’s hand away and pressing his palm to Dean’s cheek until he relents and looks him in the eye again. “And because I love you.”

“You do?” Dean asks, and hates how pathetic he sounds. How much he needs to hear it.

“I do,” Cas says.

“Save it for the altar,” Dean jokes, then gulps, because he did not mean to say that at all.

“The altar?”

Cas’ mouth lifts in a smirk.

“Shut up,” Dean groans.

“I thought you weren’t proposing.”
Dean tries and fails to glare at him.

“You’re such a dick.”

“Well, it did sound a lot like a proposal.”

“That’s just because you’re getting vague in your old age,” Dean says, giving up on the glare to smile back at him even as his heart thunders in his chest. “It’s a tragedy, really.”

Cas grins ear-to-ear, and he pulls on Dean’s hand until Dean has to lean forward and kiss him. It’s unfair how easily Cas can distract him.

“Just so you know, I’m yours with the ring or without,” Cas tells him when he pulls back. “For as long as you want me.”

“Sixty or so years, then,” Dean says, and because he’s come this far, he lets the rest out too. “I love you, Cas.”

“You do?”

Dean huffs.

“Yeah,” he murmurs. “I do.”

When Cas kisses him again, Dean can feel his smile.

The familiar rumble of the Impala’s engine is right beside them before Dean considers what that means, and he slowly lowers his hand from its place on the back of Cas’ neck. Turning, he finds Sam and Charlie watching them through the open window. Dean clears his throat.

“Uh, hey,” he says.

Charlie looks like she’s about to burst with joy, her eyes visibly tearful even at a distance. Sam, meanwhile, just gives them the kind of smug look he gets when he thinks he’s about to be hilarious.

“You guys do realize you’re not at the resort anymore, right?”

“Seriously?” Dean asks, unable to keep from laughing. “That’s all you’ve got?”

Sam grins.

“For now.”

“Asshole,” Dean laughs, and catches Cas’ hand, hauling him to his feet.

End Notes

This fic was written for the 2016 Dean/Cas Tropefest!

I was teamed up with the amazing jigglykat! Katy's art is absolutely gorgeous, and I'm thrilled which what she came up with. Please make sure to go let her know how great it is!
Also, many thanks to museaway and messier51, whose excellent beta skills helped me get this story into shape. Any weird bits that remain are either because I missed them when making edits, or because I stubbornly refused to change them--though there's only a couple of those.

Last off, a confession: there was no reported rainfall in Umpqua National Forest for the entirety of July of 2013. But I needed summer rain, and I’d already chosen this location, and at some point I think I need to ignore my near-obsessive desire to be 100% accurate at all times. That said, it did rain on July 13th, 2009. I win that round, I guess.

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Somehow I’ve been blessed with fanart for this fic, beyond what the lovely jigglykat created! You can see cacodaemonia’s gorgeous piece here :D

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!