Some Assembly Required

by narrow_staircases

Summary

It’s September of 2005, and Dean Winchester, in an attempt to outrun old mistakes and painful memories, finds himself in southern Kentucky on a wild goose chase. He’s completely certain this weird religious movement he’s “investigating” is a hoax, despite the miraculous healings people report, and he’ll be back on the road in a day or two. Things are looking up when he meets Cas, an awkward (and gorgeous) graduate student who’s actually doing honest-to-god research into the local tent revival meetings. When that research takes a weird and personal turn, Dean’s left to face two very serious realities: one, this may be a real case after all, and two, he’s fallen way harder for Cas than he should ever have let himself.

Notes

I had the amazing privilege to work with hellosaidthemoon, who is a talented and lovely human being and who produced some absolutely incredible art for this story. Please, go send her so much love!

You can find me on tumblr if you want to say hi :)

Disclaimer: William Branham and The Message Movement are absolutely real. My portrayal of them is fictional. A lot of the background details are accurate—biographical facts about Branham such as the circumstances of his death, as well as most of the theological points I reference (including the Eve and Satan thing)—but the specific group in this story and the description of their gatherings are entirely fabricated for my own dramatic purposes. The author intends no disrespect to persons living or dead, and statements made by characters within this story about any faith practice should not be taken as the author’s own opinions.
“Do you believe in miracles?”

Dean freezes, glass of iced tea halfway to his lips. “Sorry?”

“Don’t ‘sorry’ me, boy,” the woman says, shaking an arthritic finger at him. “I know you heard me, your ears are better than mine. Do you believe in miracles?”

It’s not that he hates grandmothers. He really doesn’t. But he just spent the last thirty minutes getting knocked around and inter-dimensionally screamed at by a very pissed-off ghost, and Dean just doesn’t have the patience right now for the crotchety second-degree from some old lady he just met. He wants a drink and a cheeseburger, and then another drink, ideally with a hot waitress thrown somewhere into the mix.

“Look, I know I just de-poltergeisted your neighbor’s house—” (and thank God geriatric Mrs. Winston is apparently extremely open to the concept of the supernatural, or her dropping by to borrow a cup of sugar while he was mid-cleansing ritual would have been way more problematic) “—but that doesn’t mean every myth and fairy tale and Sunday school story is true.”

She huffs and shakes her head at him. “I’m not an idiot, and that’s not what I asked.” She settles in her chair at the kitchen table, staring him down and completely ignoring Beth, actual owner of the formerly-haunted house, who is quietly hyperventilating by the sink. She’d handled the initial shock pretty well, been a pro actually at taking his word as fact and letting him do his thing, but now that the broken coffee table has been cleared away and she’s offered him a glass of sweet tea and there’s nothing to take care of anymore, her calm veneer is quickly crumbling away.

Dean gulps his tea and deliberates, knowing it’s time to make a swift exit and wondering what the best strategy is. “Okay, then,” he answers Mrs. Winston: “no.”

She just laughs. “You’re trying to tell me a young man spends his days fighting evil and he still can’t find it in himself to believe in the good?”

“Honestly, ma’am? Haven’t run into much in my experience that makes good all that easy to believe in.” Dean flashes her a cocky grin, the one that gets him free doughnuts and access to restricted files, and once got him out of a speeding ticket in the eleventh grade. He puts his empty glass on the counter, pats Beth’s shoulder and mutters a quick thanks, and starts to make his way to the door. His knee is killing him from where the poltergeist threw him into the coffee table, and if he doesn’t get some ice on it soon it’s going to be football-sized by tomorrow morning. A beer first, though. Priorities.

“They do happen, you know,” Mrs. Winston calls after him. “Miracles from God, right here in our time.”

“That a fact?” For the love of God lady, I just got my ass handed to me by a ghost, do I look like...
That a fact?"

"For the love of God lady, I just got my ass handed to me by a ghost, do I look like I'm in the mood for your touched-by-an-angel bullcrap right now?"

"My sister Marge," she begins, and Dean curses inwardly and settles against the doorframe, trying to look simultaneously interested and as if he has somewhere extremely important to be five minutes ago. "She lives over in Kentucky, back where we grew up as little girls, never left, and she’s been struggling for the past six years. Turned her back on faith after she got a bad diagnosis—cancer, in her lungs, and she was so mad at God, it was like she couldn’t even look him in the eye. Blamed him for everything. Now I’ve prayed for her soul every day since I found out, and you know what happened three weeks ago? She calls me, straight out of the blue, and tells me she’s been going to church again, and praying, and what’s more than that? She’s been healed. Went to a prayer meeting and she felt that Holy Spirit, felt its power all around her, and the doctors say she’s completely healed, not a trace of that cancer left in her body. Now what do you imagine has that kind of power, young man?"

"Chemo, Dean thinks. He says, "I suppose you’re right after all, ma’am. Certainly could happen."

Mrs. Winston beams. "And it’s not just her," she continues, getting up from the table. "Dozens of folks are being healed, hundreds maybe even by now. They’re coming from miles around, right there to Burkesville, Kentucky, to hear the voice of the Lord and feel his power at work in their lives." She comes up to him, fixes him with a strong look. "You know he’s there waiting for you, too, if you ever want to follow his voice."

"Right." Dean smiles awkwardly and shuffles to the side, opening the door behind him. "I’ll, uh, keep that in mind. Beth, anything funny starts up again, you have my number." He makes it out onto the porch, waves an awkward goodbye. "Sorry about your table."

* * *

He’s back at the motel with an ice pack on his knee, nursing a beer and watching a medical drama, when his phone rings.

Sam, he thinks immediately, because he always does, even though it’s been three-and-a-half years and you’d think he’d be over waiting for his little brother to call like some lovesick teenager. He swallows down his disappointment ahead of time and flicks the TV to mute.

"Hello?"

"Dean? How was the job?"

"Fine, Dad. Just your run-of-the-mill poltergeist, in and out in about three hours."

"Did you get hurt at all, run into any trouble with civilians?"

"Bruised my knee," Dean admits. He’d rather have John chide him about being careful over the phone than chew him out if he catches him limping around.

"Well, put some ice on it so it doesn’t swell up."

"Yes, sir." He never knows how to feel about this kind of thing—it’s nice to have his dad actually act like he gives a shit, sure (even when it’s over things that Dean knows how to do, because he’s twenty-six and a goddamn adult), but he never checked up on him like this before Sam left.

"You going to answer my other question?"

"Uh, no, no trouble with any of the neighbors," Dean lies.

"Good. So listen, I need you to head up north first thing tomorrow and meet me in Athens, Ohio. Caleb called me about a follow up on a case from a couple months back."

Fuck. Dean puts his beer on the nightstand with shaky hands and slumps back against the headboard. "Uh, what case?" he stalls.

"Dean, we were there for three weeks. You remember, that string of weird deaths at a college campus?"

"Right."

"Well, that nest we took out? Caleb thinks there might have been a couple stragglers, he’s been keeping an eye on the local news and there seem to be a few too many missing persons reports. You swept the whole place good and thorough after I left, right? I told Caleb you were there an extra day or two, dealing with the loose ends."

"Yes, sir." In reality he barely scouted out a couple of parks, and he was there for nine more days, but those are a few of many things that Dad doesn’t know about, can’t ever know about. Dean screws his eyes shut and tries to block out the thought that more people might have gotten hurt
because he couldn’t get one fucking thing right.

“Well, hopefully it should be nothing then, but I told him we’d swing through and take a quick look—”

“Dad, I can’t go.” Silence on the other end of the line, and Dean feels sick to his stomach. He tries to backtrack from his outburst (too emotional, too goddamn obvious): “I mean, sir, it’s just there’s —um, a case, I think? Something suspicious I heard someone talking about.”

It’s the flimsiest excuse he’s ever strung together, and he grimaces as the words hit his own ears, but John Winchester must be in a charitable mood because he actually doesn’t shoot him down immediately. “What about?”

Fuck it, but it’s this or nothing, because he wasn’t lying before: he can’t go back to Ohio. Yeah, there’s a rational part of his brain that realizes that the chances of actually running into Cassie are about a million to one, but he can’t face that part of his life again, not yet, maybe never. “Faith healings.”

His dad sighs heavily. “Dean, that’s not going to be—”

“A lot of them, Dad, like, hundreds of people coming to this same spot to be healed. From stuff like cancer, tumors disappearing, blind people getting their sight back.” Okay, so he’s exaggerating, but it’s not like he’s got anything to lose at this point.

“And you heard about this how?”

“Neighbor of the poltergeist lady.”

“I thought you said you didn’t have any problems with the neighbors.”

“That’s ‘cause it wasn’t a problem! She walked into the house before I’d finished the ritual, saw that thing throwing shit around, and she wasn’t even fazed, Dad. She acted like she’d seen this kind of stuff before, our kind of stuff.”

“Dean, some people believe in miracles. It doesn’t mean there’s anything actually making them happen.”

Jesus, yeah, please keep talking to me like I’m seven. “Sure, but she said these have been going on for a couple months now, and the meetings keep getting bigger. If there was nothing behind them wouldn’t they have lost steam by now?”

“What the hell do you think is going to be behind them?” John demands, exasperated. “Dean, look, I get that it might sound a little odd, but this doesn’t fit anything we know, and I’ve got a real case that I need your help with. We can’t go chasing after every random fairy tale and religious nut job.”

“Oh, because the stuff we know has panned out real well so far? Dad, maybe we need to start looking for the patterns we don’t recognize if we’re ever gonna—”

“Dean.”

He’s not quite yelling at him, but it’s close enough, and Dean stops short of the fucking cliff-edge he was about to drag them over. He pauses, tries again, keeps his tone lighter this time. “Dad, this stuff, it’s in Kentucky, okay? It’s on my way to you anyway, so how about if I stop there just for a day to poke around and see what’s up. If there’s nothing there I’ll get back in the car and drive straight up to Ohio.”

“Fine.”

Dean heaves a sigh of relief. “Okay.”

“I’ll text you the address of my motel when I get in.”

“Yes, sir. Dad, thank you—— but the line’s already dead.

Fuck. He snaps the phone shut and tosses it across the bed. See, Sammy, I can actually make my own decisions, he thinks petulantly, but it’s a hollow victory, especially considering that he wouldn’t even be in this situation if he hadn’t tried to do exactly that with Cassie in the first place.

He’s replayed that night over and over again in his mind, and there are a dozen or more versions in which it works: he tells her one of many plausible lies, or a half-truth, or eases her into it with subtle hints and solid evidence. There’s the version where she still kicks him out, but not before they have slow, desperate, I’m-sorry-we-can’t-make-this-work sex. The version where he never lets it get serious in the first place, and he doesn’t have to say anything when he leaves and Cassie’s still a friendly face he can drop by and see whenever he’s in the area. The version where
he never said anything because he never left.

The ice pack on his knee has gotten soggy and lukewarm, so he hobbles to the other side of the room to chuck it back in the freezer. He chugs the rest of his beer and cracks open another, settling back on the bed and staring at the TV, still on mute, which has gone to a commercial for paper towels.

Now he has to drive to Kentucky and interview a bunch of religious crazies. Great. He still can’t believe that’s the excuse he gave, or that Dad let him get away with it. *Anything, you could have said literally anything else instead,* he berates himself. *And you went with goddamn miracles.* It’s not absolutely worst thing he could have come up with—they’ve run into a handful of other hunters who think these sort of things could have some kind of truth to them. Hell, Sammy would have been all over that kind of thing in high school. He went through this frankly weird religious phase in the tenth grade: read the whole Bible cover-to-cover, went to the local Methodist church with a couple of school friends, called Dad a hypocrite when he told him it was a load of bullshit (“You hunt ghosts, Dad, how can you seriously tell me that’s more believable than ‘love thy neighbor as thyself’?”). Dean wonders if he still believes any of that stuff, or if his college professors have talked him out of it in a way Dad never could. (More likely he’s gone full-California hippie, doing meditation and yoga and shit.)

And in this, as much as he loves his brother, Dean has always been staunchly on Dad’s side. For a whole host of reasons, but mostly because what he told that old woman this afternoon was true: good things, overall, don’t happen. And if God or something pretending to be him is handing out free miracles in Bumfuck, Kentucky, then why the hell has his family gotten passed over so many damn times?

He could not go, obviously: kill a day or two here in Georgia while he tries to come up with his next excuse, then give Dad a fake progress report and feed him the next lie, string him along for as long as it takes for things in Ohio to resolve themselves. (Or, for Dean to grow a pair and get over his break-up, which is exactly what Dad would tell him to do and *exactly* why he’s never coming clean to him about this.) But it would all unravel at some point along the line, and anyway, he wouldn’t put it past his dad to track his phone if it came to that.

So. Kentucky, Dean groans and unmutes the TV. He’s going to need a lot more beer if he wants to block out all the memories this evening has dragged up.

* * *

He sleeps late. It’s nearing ten o’clock when Dean finally pulls himself out of bed, the beginnings of a headache pressing behind his eyes. He’s not quite hungover, but he’s thirsty as hell, and he can tell he’s going to need a constant supply of coffee to keep him going through the day.

He grabs his first cup from the motel lobby when he checks out, along with a couple of stale cinnamon-sugar-dusted doughnut holes. The clerk gives him directions to the local library, and he drives the seven blocks with the windows open wide, grimacing at the weak, soap-sudsy flavor of the coffee. It’s early September, but it’s still hot and humid and the sky is cloudless, the sort of day he would have loafed back when he was still in school. He’d cut class on plenty of days like this one, especially when he knew that Dad was just a couple days away from finishing up a case and there would be no repercussions. He wonders if Sam is sitting in some overly-air-conditioned classroom wishing he was at the beach instead, and then he wonders if Cassie is taking her lunch break at the park near her office, and he angrily stuffs the last of the doughnut holes in his mouth, because fuck both of them.

The Dalton Public Library is a small, one-story brick building with an overly-helpful staff. He gets a computer log-in ID from the smiling desk attendant and navigates his way past a pile of preschoolers listening with mild enthusiasm to a story about a bear wearing overalls.

*Kentucky miracle healings,* he types into Google, and it spits back a mess of websites for local churches advertising weekly services, some personal testimonials, and a handful of articles. He clicks on the first one—*“Tent Revivals Promise Healing, Bring Economic Boost”—*and scrolls through, hoping something will jog his memory from yesterday. *“Revival meetings in Burkesville spill into their sixth week,”* the article reads, and that might have been the town the neighbor woman mentioned? He scans a little further, hoping something else will click, but most of the article is about the benefit to local businesses from the increased visitors to the town. He adds *Burkesville* to his search, and that brings back a few more promising results: “*Revival and renewal are upon us,” “Personal Testimonies of SALVATION and HEALING,” “Local woman miraculously cured of terminal cancer.*” Bingo. Enough to go on for now, and even if it’s not the same spot Mrs. Whatshername was talking about, it honestly doesn’t matter as long as there’s enough weird to justify checking it out.

He looks up directions to Burkesville and scribbles them down on a card, pocketing the tiny golf pencil out of habit more than anything else. He can’t remember the last time he left a motel without grabbing the pen and pad of paper by the telephone, the shampoo bottles (now that Sam isn’t around to use up the whole thing), sometimes a couple towels if he’s on a particularly messy job. The backseat of the Impala is full of that kind of junk, stashed away just in case.
It’s a three-hour drive up to Burkesville, give or take. Dean stops at a Seven-Eleven on his way out of town for gas, food, and more caffeine before he gets on the highway. Most of his route is along a smaller state road running the width of Tennessee, little speed-trap towns popping up every half-hour or so. The local stations are mostly shit, so he cycles his way through mix tapes turned up to full volume, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel and singing along when he remembers the words.

This is the best part of the job, and one of the only times when he doesn’t actually mind being on his own. Dad’s shit at conversation and the silence gets awkward, especially when it reinforces the fact that the back seat is empty. Not that he misses Sam’s complaining, or his snoring. Sure, he misses the jerk and it still hurts like a bitch that he tore their family up like that, but at least Dean gets uninterrupted solitude out of the whole shitty deal. Because he’s nothing if not a fucking optimist.

He gets stuck behind a slow-moving tractor which puts him back about twenty minutes, so it’s a little after three when Dean finally passes a sign reading Burkesville, KY: pop. 1,756. Houses slowly start clustering together, joined by convenience stores, a gun shop, and more churches than seem strictly necessary for a town of one-thousand, seven-hundred and fifty-six people. Downtown Burkesville is underwhelming—not quite blink-and-you’ll-miss-it, like some of the towns he’s driven through today, but predictably Appalachian small-town quaint all the same.

Dean pulls the Impala up to a diner advertising homemade biscuits-and-gravy in the window (served fresh! all day!) and kills the engine. It’s a little early for dinner, but he could use another cup of coffee, and he knows mom-and-pop kind of places like these are the best way to hear local gossip, fast.

Inside the diner it’s hot and smells like stale bacon and some kind of fruit. There’s a handful of old men perched at the counter, all of them drinking iced tea and narrowing their eyes at him when he walks in. Besides a middle-aged couple and a few loaners scattered in the booths by the windows, the place is empty.

“Take a seat wherever you like, I’ll be with you in a minute,” the waitress calls from behind the counter. Dean settles on one of the swiveling stools at the counter, the bright-red vinyl tacky in the heat. He grins and nods a hello at the men at the other end of the counter and gets an unenthusiastic “afternoon” muttered in response. So maybe not so easy on the gossip after all.

“Sorry about the heat,” the waitress says as she comes over to him, fanning herself with her notepad. She’s tall, in her late thirties, probably, and her blonde hair is frizzing and sticking to her forehead. “Air conditioning unit broke around lunch time and the repair man won’t be here until Monday. We’re getting a couple of fans to bring in but Andy’s not back from the store yet. What can I get for you?”

“Coffee’s fine, ma’am. Black.”

“Can I get you anything to go with that? I’ve got a blackberry cobbler coming out of the oven in a couple minutes.”

“So that’s what smells so good.” He grins at her, and she beams back, a little flirtatious. He’s already seen the ring on her left hand, though, so he doesn’t push it. Not worth getting into that kind of mess. “Cobbler’d be great, thanks. Oh, and do you have a copy of the paper lying around somewhere?”

She gestures to the booths. “There’s a couple of the local one over there, help yourself. I’ll be right back with that coffee.”

“Thanks.” He slides off the stool and goes to scout out the booths. There’s a mess of papers on the one furthest from the door, where a guy about his age is sitting hunched over a legal pad, scribbling furiously and ignoring the half-eaten tuna melt by his elbow.

“Uh, hey, mind if I borrow the paper?”

The guy doesn’t look up. “I’m not reading it.”

He’s still writing, and Dean can see his forehead wrinkled in concentration under his messy brown hair. “You got a deadline or something?” he asks with a laugh.

“No.”

Okay, then. Dean scoops up the paper and heads back to the counter. So much for this place oozing talkative Southern charm.

What the clientele lacks in friendliness, though, Jackie, the waitress, more than makes up for. She’s bored and obviously into him, Dean thinks smugly (hey, just because he’s not going to act on it doesn’t mean he can’t appreciate it). “You staying in town for a while or just passing through?”
she asks when she brings over his cobbler.

Dean looks up from his paper, which is a complete bust—six pages and nothing about miracles or weird happenings of any kind. “I’m here for one night, maybe two.”

“Business or pleasure?” she asks, and winks.

Wow, not going for subtle at all. “Business,” he answers. “In fact—I’m trying to find some information on the, uh, miracle healings going on around here? For a story,” he adds quickly, when she starts to give him a sideways look. “I’m a journalist.”

“What paper d’you work for?” one of the old men asks. The whole group of them has turned to listen in on their conversation.

“Chattanooga Herald.”

The man grunts. “Never heard of it.”

“Well, it’s a little newer, and we run most of our articles online,” Dean fires back.

That shuts him up, but one of his companions chimes in with, “They sent you all the way up here to write about those whack-jobs down by the river?”

Dean shrugs. “I go where they tell me.” He turns toward the group. “So, can you tell me anything about the people at those meetings?”

“They’re fucking idiots,” the second man answers flatly, and slaps a bill on the counter. “Jacks, you better call Andy and tell him if he don’t get those fans here by the dinner rush he’s gonna lose paying customers.”

He gets up to leave, and the other men make moves to follow him. Dean shoots Jackie a puzzled look as they file out the door. “Am I missing something here?”

“People around here are a little tetchy about the tent folk,” Jackie says shortly, gathering glasses and silverware from the other end of the counter. “I thought I’d heard it was good for business, with all the visitors coming in?”

She shrugs. “Maybe for some.”

“Well, can you tell me where they meet, maybe, so I can go talk to some of them myself?” he asks.

“Excuse me.”

Dean turns, startled, to see that the guy from the booth is standing at his elbow, legal pad tucked under his arm, and holy shit his eyes are the fucking bluest thing he’s ever seen.

“I need to pay my bill.”

Dean blinks. Oh. “Oh, sure—” he says, and scoots out of the way. He’s still distracted by the guy’s eyes—and, okay, other things about him too, if he’s being honest, like the cut of his jaw or the gravely rumble of his voice—and he nearly knocks over his empty coffee mug with his elbow in the process. Jesus, Winchester, get it together.

Jackie rings up his meal, and the guy carefully tucks his change back into his billfold. “Good luck with your research,” he says solemnly, and leaves.

Jackie nods in the direction of the door as it swings shut. “You know, he’s the guy you ought to be talking to.”

“Huh?”

“About the tent meetings.”

“Right, right.” And hell yes, because he’s not about to pass up an excuse to talk to this stranger. Dean pulls out his wallet and digs around for a ten. “Here you go, ma’am, thanks for the cobbler, I’ll see you around, uh, probably.”

She seems disappointed at his swift exit, but he just tipped her, like, sixty percent, so that’ll probably make up for it. He heads out to the street, and thankfully the guy hasn’t gotten far at all. He’s standing by the Impala, checking her out.

“It’s a nice car,” he says, without looking over.
“How…oh.” There’s only one other car in the parking lot, a beat-up old green Camry that must belong to this guy. “Thanks,” Dean grins. “You, uh, into cars?”

“Not really,” the guy responds, and that’s the end of that conversation.

“So, the waitress was just—”

“Jackie flirts with everyone,” the guy interrupts him suddenly. “Don’t read too much into it.”

“Okay,” Dean says slowly, and grins, because this guy was apparently paying attention to something besides his writing, and Dean’s definitely going to read something into that. “I assumed it was just my dashing good looks.”

“Maybe in part,” the guy concedes carefully. Dean might be imagining it, but he thinks there’s a hint of a blush across his cheekbones.

“So what I was going to say,” Dean continues, settling back against the hood of the Impala with his hands in his pockets, “is that Jackie said you’re the guy to talk to about this tent meeting stuff.”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose I am.”

He doesn’t seem eager to say anything else, so Dean asks, “Are you one of the, uh, members? Followers?” Please don’t be a crazy fanatic, please don’t be a crazy fanatic…

The guy shakes his head. “No, I’ve been interviewing them.”

“So you’re a reporter, too.” That’s not ideal, since he’ll almost certainly be able to see through Dean’s cover story, but as far as the more extra-curricular possibilities with this guy that Dean’s brain is helpfully offering up, it’s a fucking far sight better than lunatic cult member.

“Graduate student, sociology. I’m writing my masters’ thesis on charismatic religious communities in rural Appalachia.”

“Oh. Uh, neat,” Dean stammers, because he’s out of his depth with this—he’s not even totally sure what sociology is, except that it’s a thing you can get a masters degree in, apparently. “So could you tell me where they meet, who I could talk to?”

The guy crosses his arms and studies him carefully. “They hold their meetings on a stretch of farmland by the river, just south of here. That’s not a secret, people in this town are just very pigheaded sometimes. I can’t promise anyone will want to talk with you, though—those in positions of leadership, that is. They’re not very fond of reporters.”

“Well, most people find me pretty hard to dislike.” Dean waggles his eyebrows.

The guy tries to keep a straight face, but Dean can see his lips twitch anyway. “Yes, I can see that.”

You’re on a job, Dean tells himself, and then in the same breath It’s a fake job, and god knows you’ve got shit to work through. Maybe this guy is the break you need, get Cassie out of your system. It’s been a while, a really fucking long time, since he’s flirted with a guy, but it feels easy, natural, like riding a bike or loading a shotgun. It certainly doesn’t hurt that this guy is hot as hell—like, really, distractingly attractive—and he definitely seems interested.

“So, uh, south of here, you said?”

“You’ll probably find at least a couple people around at any time, but like I said, don’t be too
surprised if they’re not interested in being interviewed by a reporter. The actual meetings are over the weekend, so tomorrow night would be the earliest you could expect to be able to attend one.”

“Okay, thanks.” One extra day with a good excuse to stay away from Ohio, fuck yes. And maybe not a totally wasted extra day, either. He grins at Cas again. “So, if I’m in town with nothing to do until tomorrow night, can I, uh, buy you a drink sometime?”

Cas just stares at him, this funny quizzical look on his face, and Dean can feel his heart rush up into his throat. “Shit, sorry, I totally misread this…whole—I’ll just—” he stammers, thinking god please be chill about this, please…

“This is a dry county,” Cas interrupts.

“Huh?”

“It’s a dry county. You’re asking me on a date, and I’m flattered, but we’d have to drive about forty minutes north to find a bar.”

“Oh.” Suddenly the thought of being stuck here for a couple of days is significantly less attractive, but Cas doesn’t look like he wants to punch him—he’s flattered, and Dean suddenly realizes he’s still looking at him expectantly. Shit. “Uh…dinner, then?” he gulps.

Cas’s lips twitch into a smile. “I’d enjoy that. Here.” He holds out his hand for the map, and Dean hands it over, feeling very suddenly completely out of his depth. “There’s a Mexican place a couple blocks from here that’s fairly good. Would that be alright with you, maybe six-thirty?”

“Sure.”

Cas finishes scribbling and hands back the map. “Then I’ll see you then, Dean,” he says, and then he’s walking away, over to his ugly-ass Toyota, and Dean’s left standing with the hand-drawn map in his hand and plans for a dinner date. Jesus Christ, how did that happen? He doesn’t go on dates with people, he buys them drinks and then they both get tipsy and make rash decisions in the backseat of his car or a motel room, and then they part ways before breakfast. Which, yes, that makes him sound like a shitty excuse for a human, but he’s tried the whole dating thing a grand total of twice, and both times it’s been the worst mistake of his life.

He looks back at the map in his hands, and Cas has written his phone number in the corner, his handwriting barely legible chicken-scratch. Dean checks his watch, and it’s a little after five. Okay, so: focus on the job, worry about Cas later. Right, he thinks sarcastically, opening the car door, the extremely important, definitely-not-made-up job. Which for some godforsaken reason he’s apparently giving up alcohol for. Because the world, apparently, hates him.

* * *

Driving down to the farm is, over all, a total bust. He doesn't know if it’s the rain clouds forming or just his own stupid shitty luck, but there’s no one hanging around for him to talk to. He finds the site for their meetings alright—hard to miss a huge mess of tents packed together like that—but it’s more or less deserted. Must have all skittered away to someone’s home or a motel or church or something. Where do you hang out while you're waiting for a miracle? Fuck if he knows.

Which means Dean has nothing to distract himself from the evening ahead. Not that dinner with a seriously attractive dude should be something he’s worried about…but yeah, it is. So sue him. He hasn’t been on a date in five months, and that was dinner and a college production of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof four days before Cassie dumped him. Last time he was with a guy…well, they didn’t exactly go on dates and it ended in a whole lot of shit he’d really rather not drag up again, especially not right now, thank you very much.

So an interview with an old lady completely convinced that The Lord Himself was going to cure her bunions or what-the-fuck-ever would have been kind of welcome at this juncture. He scoffs at the ground with his boots and rolls out his shoulders, still stiff from driving. It’s pretty country out here, he’ll give it that. The Cumberland River bends nearly clear around this stretch of farmland, jutting up against low hills on the far bank. Over to the north of where the huge white tents are pitched there’s a tiny island hugging the farmland, cut off by a trickle of river so thin that the trees on either side mingle branches above the water. It’s started to cool off now that the sun is setting, and a breeze picks up, flowing across the hairs on the back of his neck and causing his skin to prickle.

Dean thumbs his phone in his pocket idly. He should call John, let him know that he’ll be another day down here at the very least, but he waits. He still has nothing else to go on, not even a scrap of useless information that he can turn into a plausible lead. There’s the fact that the old men at the diner were completely uninterested in talking about any of this, but three grumpy old dudes is hardly suspicious behavior.

He scratches the back of his neck and starts walking back to the Impala. Maybe he can ask Cas about his research at dinner, and that’ll give him something to work with. Dad can wait a couple
more hours for his phone call—fuck knows he’s made Dean wait a lot longer than that before.

It’s 6:34 exactly when Dean pulls into the parking lot of El Ranchero. He’s a couple minutes late mostly because he couldn’t decide whether or not to change his shirt—the old one was kind of sweaty, but then changing it out made him feel like he was going to look like he was trying too hard to impress, and god, this is why he doesn’t go on dates. He cycled through practically all of his clean shirts before finally settling on the Pink Floyd t-shirt he’s wearing now, thus why he’s driving up a couple minutes late.

Cas isn’t there yet, though, which means he still has to wait awkwardly, turning his phone over in his hands and opening it occasionally as if he has a new text or something to read. He hasn’t put Cas’s number in yet. Honestly, he’s not sure if he’s going to—this all seemed like such a good idea at first, blowing off some steam with someone willing and ready to go, but now? Maybe he’s not ready for this yet, after everything with Cassie… If this Cas isn’t the kind of guy who’s going to be comfortable with a quick, meaningless fuck, goodbye see you again never, then maybe this is a bad plan, a seriously bad idea because he’ll just be leading him on, making unintentional promises that he can’t keep and he’ll disappoint Cas because that’s what he inevitably does, every time.

Dean’s just about convinced himself to jump ship and head up to Ohio to face all the shit he can’t hide from forever anyway, when Cas’s car turns down the road, kicking up dust in its wake. Too late to run now, so just be cool, he tells himself. He shoves his phone in his pocket and kicks at the ground while he waits for Cas to park.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Cas says before he’s even half-out of his car. “I was writing and I lost track of the time.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Dean answers, gulping a little because Cas has traded out the rumpled button-down he was wearing earlier for a black t-shirt that clings to his shoulders and chest, and it turns out that under the messy academic exterior, Cas is fit, all flat, toned planes that make Dean a little self-conscious about the soft pudge of his own belly. Right, this is why he’s doing this.

Cas runs a hand through his hair, rendering it even more messy and bedhead than it was before.

He gestures towards the front door. “Shall we?”

The restaurant is more hole-in-the-wall than touristy; multi-colored decorations are at a minimum and the sound system isn’t blasting mariachi music. The waiter seats them at a booth in the far corner from the door, leaves them with menus and silverware and goes to grab a pitcher of water. Dean nervously flips the menu over three or four times scanning for their beers before he remembers. God damn Bible belt.

“I’d skip the chile relleno if I were you, but everything else I’ve had off the menu is quite good,” Cas comments.

“So, you come here often?” Dean jokes awkwardly.

Cas actually laughs at that, and Dean warms at the sound. Cas’s laugh is deep and soft and genuine, even though the joke was lame at best. “Several times. I’ve only been in town since Monday, but I’m not very adventurous. I honestly recommended this restaurant only because I haven’t been to any of the others in town, besides the diner.”

“You don’t get sick of the same thing every day?”

Cas shrugs. “Not really. I suppose I will eventually, but I like consistency.”

The waiter comes back with water and a basket of chips and tells them to take their time with the menu. They snack on chips and salsa and look at the menu mostly in silence, broken occasionally by Cas commenting on various items. Their hands brush once when they both reach for the chips at the same time, and it takes a Herculean effort on Dean’s part to not snatch his hand back like a skittish teenager.

“You’re not a local, then?” Dean asks, once he’s settled on a combination plate.

“Not really,” Cas answers. “I was actually born just a few towns over, but my family moved to Virginia when I was two.”

“That’s gotta be a weird coincidence, coming back to your home town for a research project.”

Cas shrugs. “Not really, I don’t think. These sort of charismatic movements are very common in this part of the country. I suppose I chose to come here for my research in part because it’s where I spent some of my childhood, but there were half a dozen other communities I could have chosen instead.”
“The miracles, though—those aren’t that common.”

“You’d be surprised.”

The waiter picks that moment to come back for their orders, so Dean doesn’t get to ask him more about that comment, even though he’s itching to. He sips at his water and glances around the restaurant while Cas gives his order. It’s pretty crowded with all types—older couples, families with young kids, a good handful of loaners. A crowded room is good, it makes them less conspicuous. Cas hadn’t batted an eye at the idea of a date, so Dean is assuming he knows the area and it’s not that big a deal for two guys to be seen in public together, but: Bible belt. You never know. He still feels the need to check his back, be constantly aware of his surroundings, even though neither of them is really giving off strong this-is-a-romantic-outing vibes.

“So, tell me about your research,” he prompts once the waiter’s gone.

Cas tilts his head. “Please don’t tell me asking me out on a date was just a pretense so you could grill me for information for your article.”

Dean flinches automatically at the word date and shoots a sideways glance before he can catch himself, but no one’s staring at them. “What? No, I’m just interested, seriously,” he protests. “Professionally interested,” Cas insists. His forehead is pinched and he looks legitimately disappointed, even though he’s trying to hide it, and God help him but Dean finds it totally endearing.

“Hey, professional interest doesn’t mean there can’t be other interest, too,” he says, leaning forward. “Come on, humor me, man. I swear, once our food gets here, the topic’s off-limits. Look, no notebook,” Dean says, lifting his hands in mock surrender. “It’s not an interview, it’s just—getting to know each other.”

Cas sighs and reaches for another chip. “You know you’re unfairly persuasive,” he grumbles.

Dean grins. “Yeah, I know.”

“This restaurant has exceptionally fast service.”

“My stomach and brain are both happy to hear it. Come on, Cas,” he prompts. “Tell me about what you do.”

“Fine.” Cas settles back in his seat. “I’ve been working on my masters in sociology part-time at VCU for the past three years. I started my thesis project in the spring, which focuses on the role that charismatic and pentecostal religious movements play in impoverished, rural societies. The group here in Burkesville is my case study, so I’ve been interviewing the members, some people in the local community, that sort of thing. Observing from the outside, mostly, when I can.”

“Have you gone to any of the healing services?”

Cas shakes his head. “Not yet. I’ve only been in town since Monday.”

“Oh, right,” Dean mumbles around a mouthful of chips. Once he swallows, he prompts, “So, what do you think? Are they for real?”

“That’s not really the point of my project,” Cas explains. “A theologian would be concerned about the inherent truth of their beliefs, but I’m simply interested in their impact. Whether God, or the miracles, or any of their beliefs are real doesn’t particularly matter: if someone believes in them, it’s going to change the way they live their life regardless.”

“But it’s got to matter to you, right? Even if you don’t write about it in your thesis or whatever.”

“Why?” Cas prompts. “Why does it need to matter?”

“Because it does,” Dean insists. “If it’s real, then that’s, uh, kind of a huge deal, and if it’s not, then someone’s scamming a shit ton of people and they oughta be stopped.”

“Who says they’re being scammed?”

“Uh, if the whole thing is fake, then yeah, it’s a scam.”

“Even if the people in leadership are true believers themselves?”

“Yes?”

Cas studies him. “Dean, do you believe in God?”

Dean blinks. “Wow, you sure go straight for the jugular, don’t you?” he stutters.
“You’re the one who wanted to talk about my research,” Cas counters.

“Yeah, well…”

“I just want to illustrate a point, I’m not going to judge you for your answer. And you don’t have to answer if it makes you uncomfortable,” Cas quickly adds.

“No.” Dean stares at him a little defensively. “No, I don’t believe in God.”

Cas nods acceptingly. “Do you have proof? Obviously you have reasons for your belief, but can you prove, absolutely prove, beyond any reasonable doubt, the non-existence of God?”

The image of his mom’s body, suspended in a bed of flames, flashes into Dean’s mind, but he’s so not going there right now. “No,” he admits begrudgingly.

Cas smiles at him. “You don’t need to. People who think they can are generally terribly misguided.” He reaches for another chip calmly, like talking about super personal shit like this with someone he barely knows is totally normal. “So you’ll live your life, based on this belief, and inevitably that belief is going to impact the people around you—a friend, a family member, maybe a child. Maybe you make a decision, based on that belief, and it affects someone you don’t even know. That’s not malicious intent, Dean. That’s just how this world works: we’re all constantly operating on limited knowledge, and we simply do the best we can.”

“Okay, fine,” Dean allows. “But then why wouldn’t you want to improve what you know, so you can make better decisions?”

“I do,” Cas agrees. “But I think some things—like the existence of a god—are fundamentally unknowable. Human interactions, behavioral patterns, cause and effect based on what we believe: those are things I think we can learn more about. And so that’s why I study what I study,” he finishes simply.

Dean doesn’t know what to say in response to that, so he settles for chugging his water instead. Fuck, he hasn’t had a conversation like this in maybe ever, and no, it’s not illuminating or whatever, it’s fucking miserable. His palms are sweating and he feels shaky and over-exposed.

“This particular movement has a fascinating history,” Cas interjects into the silence, and his tone sounds almost apologetic, as if he’s trying to make up for Dean’s minor panic. “They’re an off-shoot of the Message movement, a Pentecostal Christian group founded on the teachings of William Branham. This particular branch is extremely fundamental, very eschatological in their focus.”

“Eska-what?”

“Eschatology—it’s the study of the end times. Judgement day, the second coming, that kind of thing.”

“So, they’re performing miracles and they think, what, Jesus is going to show up and crash the party any day now?” he asks.

“Well, it’s a little more complicated than that, but—”

“Here you go, folks,” the waiter announces. “Combination seven with no sour cream, and number fifteen for you, sir. More water, chips?”

He brings them refills and they assure him that yes, everything’s correct, it looks delicious. As he walks away, Cas continues, “So, anyway, the Message movement’s end-times beliefs are a little more unique in that—”

“Hey, no no no,” Dean waves his fork at him. “A promise is a promise: food’s here, so it’s your turn to pick the topic. No more shop talk.”

“Okay, then.” Cas smiles, and Dean feels his nerves calming. “Do you travel a lot, for your job?”

“Pretty much constantly,” Dean answers. This is easy now. Hunts become stories for his paper, Dad and Sam stay out of the picture, but besides that he can tell Cas about pretty much anything that happens on the road. And he does, which is the weird thing: he just kind of goes on autopilot, telling slightly-edited stories and enjoying Cas’s reactions, and before he knows it he’s tuning back into the conversation to hear himself saying, “it’s rough, you know, because half the time I’m getting called in somewhere there’s already a dead body—maybe two or three—and it’s like what’s even the fucking point, right? It’s too late for me to save them, and… I don’t know, it’s selfish probably, but sometimes I wish I didn’t even know about it.”

Cas looks at him, patient and a little concerned, over his mostly-empty plate. “But that isn’t your job. I mean—I’m sorry, I’m not trying to dismiss the way you react to those cases, but you’re not a
police officer, or an EMT. You’re a reporter, you tell their stories.”

Dean gulps. “Right.” When did he shift into telling Cas about his life, his real life, shit that he doesn’t talk about with anybody—and where the hell was his brain when that happened?

“Sometimes it just doesn’t feel like it’s enough, I guess.”

Cas’s face has turned gentle, and there’s something… fuck, he doesn’t know what it is but it’s way too much, too serious. “Forget it,” he snaps, before Cas can say something that’s just going to freak him out further.

“Dean, I’m sorry, did I—“

“Nope.” He plasters on a grin. “It’s been a long day, that’s all.” He waves the waiter over, eager for a quick exit out of what’s feeling like a failed experiment.

“So, I’ll see you tomorrow, at the meetings?” Cas asks as they walk out to their cars. “I believe they’ll be starting around noon.”

“Oh, yeah,” Dean answers. “See you then.” He digs in his pocket for his keys, knowing he should say something else like it was nice meeting you or thanks for a great evening.

Cas beats him to it. “Dean, I hope—” he starts, then tries again. “I have the sense I made you very uncomfortable this evening, and I want to apologize for that.” He lingers by the Impala, studying the ground carefully. “I’ve been told I tend to come on too strong.”

“Who tells you that?”

“My exes, occasionally,” Cas answers. “My sister, frequently. She seems to believe it’s her mission in life to ‘fix me.’”

He makes the air quotes with his fingers, and Dean can’t help but laugh. “Shit, man. I didn’t know you had a sister.”

Cas grimaces. “I have three, actually, all of them significantly older than me. I was an oops baby, something they were always keen to remind me of.”

“Siblings, huh?”

“Do you have sisters, or brothers?” Cas asks.

“A younger brother, Sam. He’s been a pain in my ass ever since he shot up, like, half a foot taller than me. But he’s a good kid, smart as hell,” he adds. “He’s studying pre-law at Stanford. All of the brains of the family, right there.”

“You’re proud of him.”

“Damn right I am,” Dean agrees, because yes, there’s a part of him that’s still pissed as hell at Sam for everything, but he’ll defend him to the death to other people.

They’re silent for a moment before Dean realizes, belatedly, that he never responded to Cas’s apology. “It’s not your fault,” he forces himself to say. “Tonight, and me being…well, kind of a dick, probably. I don’t do this sort of thing very often,” he admits, and it’s the truth, because there’s some part of him that feels like Cas deserves the truth. At least this much.

And he doesn’t even know why, why he instinctively trust this guy so much. It’s not like he’s said or done anything that Dean can put his finger on that would earn him that right—and Christ knows Dean’s list of people he can rely on is about as long as a toothpick—and yet, despite how nervous and uncomfortable the whole evening made him, something about Cas just seems—right. Dependable. He should know better than to lean into that, but it’s just so fucking tempting.

Cas’s shoulders soften. “You weren’t a dick, I promise. I enjoyed this evening very much, I hope I’ve made that clear.”

“Uh, yeah, me too,” Dean answers automatically, and okay, that’s a lie, but it’s not like Cas was the part of the evening he hated. He shifts his weight back and forth, hesitant. “See you tomorrow, I guess?”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Cas replies. He heads back to his car, and Dean gets in the driver’s seat of the Impala. He puts the keys in the ignition but doesn’t start the engine yet, just sits there for a minute, processing. He gives Cas an awkward half-wave as he backs up and out of the parking lot. He’s cute, he thinks to himself, almost reluctantly, which makes him feel like he’s back in the eighth grade again, noticing boys for the first time and without a notion in hell what to do about it. He can feel the back of his neck flush as embarrassing memories come rushing back, unbidden: of awkwardly pushing down doomed crushes, of throwing all his swagger into dating as many girls as possible, of the absolute terror in the pit of his stomach the first time he and Nate
awkwardly made out behind the bleachers in the field house.

Dean pushes back at the instinctive panic. He’s a grown-ass, independent adult now. Cas isn’t fucking cute, alright, he’s hot. Hot and apparently available and Dean can do this, he can get dinner with a guy and do the “get to know you” conversations, because that’s what grown-ass adults do. And Cas knows he’s just passing through town, there’s no way he can have his mind set on something any more serious than a fling… right?

Jesus. He needs to stop over-thinking this, is what he needs to do, and go find a hotel room for the night. He turns the keys in the ignition, and the engine grows to life, solid and familiar.

* * *

Dean wakes in a generally foul mood. Like a giant sap, he dreamt about Cassie, and when he wakes and realizes he’s not in her fourth-floor walk-up but in a bare-bones budget hotel with broken air-conditioning, his mood sours almost instantaneously. He runs the shower while he brushes his teeth, pissed at his subconscious for dragging up memories that he’s totally over, seriously, or at least maybe he would be if stupid shit like this didn’t happen. Somewhere in-between showering and getting dressed he settles on the idea that his date with Cas last night was the trigger for his dream, and that just stokes the general annoyance even more.

The one upside to the low-end chain motel he found a room in is that it does have a free continental breakfast, by which they mean coffee, some assorted cereals, and soggy danishes. Dean stacks four pastries on his plate and works his way through them like it’s a chore, studying the local paper for anything out of the ordinary while he eats. He’s still not quite certain how to treat this Not-Actually-A-Case Case: he’ll sort of instinctively get sucked into digging around, like yesterday at the diner or right now with the ten-page spread of the Burkesville Herald, and then five minutes later he’ll remember that he’s wasting his time. Each time it happens he feels stupid, like he’s stumbled into his own trap. But it’s not as if he has anything better to do.

Unsurprisingly, there’re no hints at anything otherworldly in the paper, although he does start to get a sense for why people at the diner yesterday were so cagy about the tent meetings. The letters to the editor section is almost entirely complaints about the embarrassment and inconvenience the group is to the town. Some local businesses have gotten a bump in sales, but mostly from folks—well, like him, here and gone in a couple of days. Reporters, sometimes, more often people chasing down a quick miracle over the weekend who need a bed for the night. The core of the group, though, the ones who stay day in and day out—those folks the town seems to have no tolerance for. Their tents are an “eyesore,” their children are unruly and why aren’t they in school?, and there’s the overwhelming implication that they’re giving the town a bad name. “Religion’s all fine and good, but when you’re harboring a bunch of lunatics praying for the end of the world how can you expect anyone to take us seriously?” one woman writes. “People are visiting, sure, but not for our business. They’re coming to gawk at us.” Another letter wonders if The Message Movement is on its way to being the next Heaven’s Gate, and what are the authorities planning to do when they discover that they have a mass suicide on their hands?

Dean drains the last of his coffee and checks his watch. Ten-twenty, and the meetings start around one. He could head in early and try to scrounge up an interview or two, keep up appearances. That, of course, greatly increases the likelihood of him running into Cas, and he hasn’t made up his mind whether that’s a plus or a minus. Overthinking, he reminds himself. Just do your fucking job.

He’s surprised to see the number of cars lining the road as he reaches the meeting site. Compared to the almost eerie calm he encountered yesterday, the place seems to have exploded into activity. Dean parks the Impala behind a white twelve-passenger van with a church logo pasted across its side. He rifles through the glove box for a press ID, realizing belatedly that he gave Cas his real name, which obviously none of his fake IDs will match. Whatever, he’ll be out of here by this time tomorrow anyway, so even if his slip-up somehow becomes obvious it won’t be a problem for long.

Dean tucks his gun into his jacket pocket, because this might not be a case but as far as he’s concerned, regular humans—especially the fanatic type—are a bigger problem anyway. After a moment’s hesitation, he pockets the EMF reader as well.

Cas’s suggestion that people might be reluctant to talk to him proves to be the biggest bullshit ever. The first person he stops, a middle-aged lady carrying a Bible the size of a dictionary, barely lets him get through his I’m with the press, ma’am, just wondering if I could ask a few questions set-up before she’s peppering him with information: she’s got a bad hip, still waiting on her miracle but Jim Preston’s had arthritis for years, so bad he could barely move his fingers, and now he’s playing piano again and is Dean aware that we’re living in the End Days? Like a magnet, other people are drawn over as they make their way from their cars to the tent, and Dean hears the same stories over and over again. So-and-so was healed. We felt the Spirit moving. Christ is coming, any day now, are you ready for His return?

What surprises him the most is that, as best as he can gather, no one’s actually performing the miracles: they just—happen. He’d expected some kind of leader, laying on hands and calling
down the powers of God, like those televangelists that used to scare the shit out of him when he was younger and flipping through channels late at night while Dad was off on a hunt, the ones who would reach out their arms and scream at demons like they could stick their hand through the television set and pull them straight out of you. Hard to convince a kid not to be terrified by something like that when he knows monsters are real.

But, according to these people, that’s not what’s going on here. There are leaders who preach, and gather the people for prayer meetings, but they’re not running the show, dictating who gets healed and who doesn’t. “That’s the Spirit,” an older man tells Dean. “Christ says where two or three are gathered, there He is among them, and the Holy Spirit moves in that place in mysterious ways, son.”

Dean puzzles over this as the group slowly drifts away. On the one hand, no egotistical, megalomaniac man of God to deal with, which is always a plus in his book. But on the other hand, if all this can’t be chalked up to some sort of cult of personality, then what’s pulling people here by the hundreds?

“Hello, Dean.”

He whips around, startled, and nearly knocks Cas’s paper coffee cup out of his hand. “Shit, sorry, dude.”

Cas winces as he transfers the cup to his other hand and shakes spilled coffee off his fingers. “It’s fine,” he grumbles, sounding very much like it is not fine and Dean’s about two missteps away from getting the rest of the drink tossed in his face. It’s such a transformation from the careful, eager-to-please Cas he had dinner with the night before that Dean does a double-take, looking Cas over warily and taking in the messy hair, rumpled clothes, and the dark circles under his eyes.

He’s willing to bet solid money that the guy stayed up writing most of the night and only slept sitting up at his desk, if at all.

He’s also definitely not going to ask if that’s the case, though, since Cas seems to be one of those people who needs two or three cups of coffee before they can interact properly with other humans.

“So, uh, the folks here seem pretty friendly so far,” he ventures, hoping that’s a safe conversational topic.

Cas grunts. “People will talk to anyone if they think it’ll get them their name in the paper.”

Okay, fuck safe territory. “I’m sorry, are you jealous because these people like me better than you?”

“They don’t like you, they like your connection to the soulless corporate media and the idea of a chance at fame,” Cas shoots back. “If you had a camera too, I promise you, they wouldn’t give you the space to breathe.”

“Oh, I think it’s my good looks and my effervescent charm.”

“You would think that,” Cas scoffs.

“You know, you’re awfully cute when you’re pissed.”

Cas colors and buries his face in his coffee cup. “Fuck off,” he mutters under his breath.

Dean just grins, hands in his pockets. He likes this Cas—not that he didn’t like the serious, thoughtful version he met yesterday, but something about Cas’s crankiness calms Dean’s nerves. Joking with him like this feels easy and natural, as if he’s somehow a friend he’s known for months or even years, rather than less than twenty-four hours.

Cas runs a hand through his hair and groans. “I’m being an ass, aren’t I?”

“No, that’s me,” Dean reassures him. “You look like you could have used a couple extra hours of sleep.”

“I was up late writing,” Cas answers. “Bingo. And the coffee hasn’t really set in yet.”

“That’s fair, take your time. Although, really,” Dean prods him, “soulless corporate media?”

Cas shakes his head. “Oh no, I stand by that bit,” he deadpans.

“So, d’you have any sense what we’re in for this afternoon?” Dean asks, as they start to follow the stream of people towards the tent.

“I wouldn’t expect anything sensational, if that’s what you’re asking,” Cas replies. “Brother Matthew and Brother Greg use the afternoons for preaching and instruction. That’s really their focus in the first place, not the miracles and faith healings that the media focuses on. If something
miraculous takes place they welcome that, obviously, but they consider it a result of the teaching and prayers of the gathering, not an end to itself.”

“I’ll bet they don’t mind that it’s good PR, though,” Dean argues. “‘You catch more flies with honey’ and all that shit, right? I mean, no one’s traveling this far to sit in a drafty tent just so they can get lectured at.”

Cas sips at his coffee before answering. “Well, the cynics aren’t, no. But yes, I suppose it’s fairly in keeping with Biblical traditions for people to demand signs and miracles from their religious leaders, as assurances of their legitimacy.”

“So everyone’s a cynic at heart, is what you’re saying, yeah?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you have an exasperating habit of hearing whatever you want to hear?” Cas complains.

“Nah, usually I just hear people telling me that the sun shines out of my ass.”

Cas rolls his eyes. “Right.”

“Hey, Cas!” A young woman waves at them from the other side of the field, her long brown hair blowing across her face.

Cas waves back a little awkwardly and turns to Dean. “That’s Aimee, she’s one of the group who I’ve been interviewing. If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to go speak with her before the meeting begins.”

“Sure, sure.” Dean shoves his hands in his pockets. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

Cas walks briskly away, and Dean studies the angles of his shoulder blades a little self-consciously. A brief image flashes, unbidden, of tracing those sharp edges and the dip of Cas’s spine with his tongue, deliberate and reverent, and he has to shake his head to push back the surge of need that pools in his stomach.

“You’re in public, at a fucking church meeting,” he chides himself, and keeps walking towards the main tent, feeling somehow as if every person he passes can read his thoughts.

The air inside the tent is hot and stuffy, despite the open back and a few wall panels pulled up along the sides for ventilation. Seats near the front are filling up quickly—fine by him, anyway—and Dean plants himself in the last row, near the outside aisle. The stage area is pretty plain, a couple microphones set up and not much else. Light bulbs hang from the top edge of all four walls of the tent, adding a yellowish glow.

A man with hardly any hair and a broad smile approaches him, balancing a stack of books in one arm. “Do you need a Bible, friend?”

“Uh, no thanks, I’m fine.”

“I’m Brother Andrew. Are you joining us for the first time?”

“Yeah, Dean,” he answers as he shakes the man’s hand. Brother Andrew has a grip like a vice, despite his thin, bookish appearance.

“Well, we’re pleased you’re here, Dean. I have a couple of tracts…” He rummages through his stack, leaning to one side as the pile threatens to tip over. “Here we go. These will explain some of the basics of Brother Branham’s teachings. Hang on to those, those are yours,” he adds, pushing a thin paperback book and a couple of hand-printed flyers into Dean’s hands. “If you have questions about anything, please let me know!”

“Sure.” He flips the pamphlets over in his hands. What is The Message? one flyer asks, a stock photo of a smiling group of people staring up at him.

The Message Movement (the inside page reads) is a Spiritual movement founded on the Holy Bible and the teachings of Brother William Branham, prophet and teacher. We are a community of half-a-million believers, in every nation on earth, dedicated to proclaiming the eternal truths of the Gospel, the ministry of healing, and the promised tent vision of the Last Days.

Who is Brother Branham?

William Branham was born in Kentucky in 1909, and felt the hand of the Spirit in his life from an early age. He began his ministry as a Baptist preacher, leading tent revivals in Indiana, and performing his first of many faith healings in St. Louis in 1946. Through his sermons and writings he has passed on to us the gift of his prophetic revelations concerning the seven seals and his vision for a world-wide tent revival in the final days. Although Brother Branham left this earthly plane in 1966, we boldly await his promised resurrection and the day when the vision revealed to him by the Spirit will be fulfilled.
Okay… so nix on the “no creepy charismatic leader” thing. Just a dead creepy charismatic leader, and a shit-ton of people who apparently believe that he’s some kind of modern-day Jesus. Even better.

A woman taps him on the shoulder to ask if he’s saving the seat next to him for anyone. He tells her yes, even though he’s not sure if he’s supposed to save a seat for Cas or not. The room’s filling up more, Dean notices as he looks around, but he doesn’t see Cas anywhere in the crowd. Saving a seat is probably the better way to go, because if it turns out Cas doesn’t want to sit with him, there could always just be a seat empty from no fault of his own, and that’s better than giving Cas the impression that he doesn’t care about sitting with him, because in fact he does. God, this whole thing feels like high school all over again. Except, you know, way more religion.

People keep passing by and offering him Bibles. By the third person he eventually just gives in and takes one so that they’ll quit asking. It’s one of those little pocket-sized New Testament-plus-Psalms-and-Proverbs that people hand out on street corners. This one has a bright orange cover and he flicks through it idly, studying the first couple of pages that have John 3:16 printed in over thirty different languages. He recognizes a couple words of Spanish from sophomore year, when they actually stuck in one place for a while, for once, a city in southern Montana. Spanish had been his best subject, the only one he really tried in, and he remembers being good enough that he worked his way through all the beat-up paperbacks in the school library’s limited foreign-language section. They were all grade-school-level chapter books, the kind with pictures on every other page, but still. He’s forgotten pretty much all of it by this point—the high school in the next town they moved to, somewhere in Idaho, was so shitty they only had a single intro-level Spanish class, and so that was the end of that.

“Folks, welcome, and take your seats!” a man at one of the front microphones calls out. “We’ll be starting in about five minutes.”

Cas shows up a couple minutes later, his hand on Dean’s shoulder as he gestures to the seat next to him. “May I?”

“Yes, of course.” He twists his knees to one side so that Cas can shuffle past him.

“The caffeine’s finally setting in, ” Cas says as he leans down to place his coffee cup beneath his seat. “So from now on I intend to be much better company than I was earlier.”

“Oh yeah? How much better company?” Dean drops his voice down to a whisper and adds, “Keep in mind we are at a prayer meeting.”

“Well I never said I planned to be here the entire day,” Cas shoots back, and his voice is a low, quiet rumble that shakes something in Dean’s chest and sends heat sparking up the back of his neck.

He doesn’t get a chance to respond—not that he’s even sure what he’d say in response to that, because in all honesty he was expecting Cas to blush, not up the ante—because there’s a lot of applause all of a sudden, and when he looks up he sees that two men in grey button-down shirts have moved towards the microphones in the front of the tent.

“Brothers and sisters, welcome!” the taller of the two men shouts as the crowd settles down. He’s got bright red hair, shaved close to his head but not quite short enough to disguise his deeply receding hairline. “I am Brother Matthew, and we are delighted to share with you today the good news of the Promise. Who is here for the first time? Raise your hands!”

Hands shoot up across the room—less than a quarter of the audience, probably, but still a good number. Next to him, Cas dutifully raises his hand, and Dean begrudgingly follows suit. There’s applause from the rest of the audience, and Brother Matthew smiles widely. “We welcome all you new seekers especially. Please, if you haven’t already received any of our literature, or if you don’t have a Bible, keep your hand raised, and an usher will come along and provide you with those. And of course, please feel free to speak with myself or anyone else with a name tag at any of the breaks, whether you have questions or if you’d just like to introduce yourself, that’s fine too.”

“As you may already know, our meeting this afternoon is devoted to teaching, and we hope you’ll join us again this evening for prayer—that will take place beginning at eight pm, in this same space.” Brother Matthew pauses and smiles. “Now, I think that’s all I have in the way of logistics, so I’m going to turn things over to Brother Greg.”

There’s light applause as the other man steps forward. He’s older than Brother Matthew, and he’s got a drooping mustache and shaggy, graying haircut that look like they crawled straight out of the 70s. He reminds Dean a little of some of his dad’s buddies from the marines, guys who hung around after Mom’s funeral and tried to keep John from drinking himself directly into the grave, until he eventually drove them away. Good guys, as Dean remembers. One of them gave him a Transformer, and he played with that thing constantly those first few months. Once they started moving around he’s pretty sure it got left behind in a motel somewhere along the line.
“Please join me in prayer.” Brother Greg lifts his arms, and heads bow throughout the audience. Dean sneaks a surreptitious glance at Cas, who’s got his head down. He’s worrying at a hangnail on the side of his thumb. “Almighty Father in heaven…” Brother Greg begins, and Dean loses most of the rest of his prayer, distracted by Cas’s long, angular fingers, boney knuckles and soft pads. Not fucked up like Dean’s, with his multiple crooked fingers from breaks that never set quite right and the scars from bites and broken bottles and mishandled weapons. Cas’s hands look clever and capable, and Dean’s suddenly painfully aware of at least four different places where he wants those hands on his body right fucking now. He screws his eyes shut and ducks his head because, dammit, he’s not getting turned on by a dude’s hands in a fucking prayer meeting.

“….and now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, to whose Name we give glory both now and forever, amen.”

“Amen,” the assembly echoes back.

“I want to share with you all today the lesson of the beggar at the Gate Beautiful,” Brother Greg begins, almost before the audience’s amen has died away. “Turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter three.”

Cas leans over. “It’s in the middle, after John’s gospel,” he whispers.

“Yeah, I know,” Dean hisses back. Cas gives him a funny look, and Dean adds, “Spent a lot of time in hotels.” It’s not like he hasn’t read the book, he just doesn’t believe in it or whatever.

“Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour. And a certain man lame from his mother’s womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful…”

Dean tries to pay attention, sort of. The Bible language is weird, with its gave heed’s and hath’s, and whatever the fuck wot means. More to the point, though, there’s absolutely no way this guy’s sermon is going to hold any clues to any kind of supernatural stuff going on, on the point-zero-one-percent chance that there even is anything non-cult weird happening. Dean tunes out pretty quickly and lets his gaze start to wander over the audience. It’s a total cross-section of types, from old people to men in business suits to college-aged kids. Most of the women are wearing skirts and have their hair long and covered, kind of an Amish-hippie hybrid look.

He notices Aimee, the girl Cas was talking with earlier, on the other side of the tent, a couple of rows up. She looks younger than he initially thought, maybe closer to Sam’s age, and he wonders how well Cas knows her. He called her a contact for his research, someone he’s interviewed, but Dean wonders if there’s anything more to it than that. Something, probably, since Cas had to go over and talk to her. Maybe she’s super connected—this Brannan guy’s granddaughter or something. Great-granddaughter? He tries to do the math and gives up quickly, because he’s bored, yeah, but he’s not that bored.

Cas is taking notes on his legal pad, his pencil scratching away at high speed. Dean casts a sideways glance at his notes, but it’s a bunch of scribbling even worse than the chicken scratch Dean saw before. “Dude,” he whispers, “are you taking notes in shorthand?”

“Shhhhh,” Cas shushes him angrily, and keeps writing. His fingers are bunched so tight at the end of his pencil that his knuckles are turning white, and Dean’s got half a mind to buy the guy a tape recorder so that his fingers don’t cramp up and freeze like that. He’s going to get arthritis by the time he’s thirty if he keeps going at this rate, for christ’s sake.

Dean tries to focus back in on the sermon, but it’s a lot of talk about judgement and seals and a whole bunch of names of places he doesn’t recognize but that don’t sound like they’re in the US. He shifts in his chair and remembers the EMF reader tucked into his coat pocket. Dean’s almost tempted to turn it on, just to double-check for stuff he knows won’t be there, but it’s in his left-hand pocket, the one next to Cas, and he’s pretty sure the guy’s not so absorbed in his note-taking that he wouldn’t notice crackling and humming that close.

He watches the flecks of dust that hang in the air inside the streams of sunlight coming down from cracks in the tent walls, studies the backs of people’s heads and tries to guess which ones are just here for a miracle and not all this end-of-the-world crap. He glances down at Cas’s notes again, which have gotten even messier, as if that was even possible. What makes someone decide to be a sociologist, anyway? It’s not like they have classes on it in high school. They didn’t have classes about being a lawyer though, either, and it’s not like that stopped Sammy from deciding that was a career move important enough to disown himself from the family. He wonders, if he called him right now and told him where he was, that he was at a fucking prayer meeting, what would Sam do when he heard that message? He’d be curious, sure, but enough to get him to actually return a goddamn phone call? Unlikely, Dean decides. He’d probably assume Dean was drunk, or high, or making shit up to get attention. And that’s if he even listens to Dean’s messages at all before deleting them.

Oh fuck, he didn’t call Dad last night. He’s going to be pissed…
…not that that’s anything new…

“Dean.” He jerks his head up suddenly, and realizes that people around him are applauding and Cas is shaking his arm.

Dean looks over at him and blinks slowly. “What?”

Cas’s brow is furrowed but his lips are twitching upwards as if he wants to smile. “Did you fall asleep?”

“What? No.” Dean opens his eyes as wide as they’ll go and shakes his head back and forth, fighting the urge to yawn. He totally drifted off, fuck.

“We’re taking a twenty-minute break,” Cas explains. “Walk around for a bit, stretch your legs.”

They walk over to the riverbank, weaving their way around clusters of people talking and a small roving army of energetic children. Cas, thankfully, doesn’t ask him what he thought of the sermon, but he does ask about his article—what kind of piece he’s writing, how it compares to his usual assignments, why his paper sent him so far afield for such a minor story. “It just seems strange, for a local paper. Don’t you usually focus on local news?”

“Uh, my editor’s trying out a new model, working in some smaller, human-interest stories that wouldn’t get picked up at any kind of national level. Trying to make the paper stand out, that sort of thing.”

It sounds like a bullshit answer to him, but Cas just nods in passive agreement. He’s flexing the fingers of his writing hand, grimacing a little as he wiggles them back and forth.

“You need a tape recorder or something,” Dean tells him.

“Not allowed,” Cas answers. “I use one for most of my interviews, but I was expressly forbidden from recording any public meetings. In any form,” he adds begrudgingly.

“You sneaky bastard,” Dean grins.

Cas shrugs. “I may have shot myself in the foot with this plan, though. Or hand, I suppose,” he jokes lamely.

“You know you can hide a tape recorder in your jacket or something, right?”

Cas’s face falls. “I…had not considered that.”

Dean laughs, and before he knows what he’s doing he’s reaching out and grabbing Cas’s sore hand with his own, digging his thumb in deep to massage the bed of his palm. His brain catches up a second later, screaming panic at him, but it’s not like he can exactly drop Cas’s hand like a hot potato, so he uses both hands instead so that he can convince himself he’s just providing a medical service and that this isn’t because he wants to hold Cas’s hand, because he definitely doesn’t.

Cas just stands there, sort of frozen, and god this is so awkward, he can’t do it. Dean lets Cas’s hand go with a weird little pat and coughs. “Uh. Better?”

Cas rolls his hand around and stares at it like he doesn’t know what it is, then looks up at Dean in pretty much the same way. “It’s a little numb, actually, but I suppose in this instance that could be considered an improvement.”

Fuck. “Right. Sorry, that was stupid,” he mutters, turning away towards the river and shoving his hands deep in his pockets.

“Dean, it’s fine,” Cas answers. “It was a nice gesture.” Dean can feel his ears coloring, and he’s relieved when Cas adds, “I just wouldn’t suggest making a career change to professional masseur.”

Jokes he can do. “Come on, man, you’re crushing all my hopes and dreams here.”

“Fair payback.”

“Touché.” He rolls his shoulders back and watches the water a little longer. The trees on the opposite bank are just starting to turn, teardrop-shaped leaves tinged with yellow that reflect in the river like flecks of gold. “Nice country,” he says, for something to say, and Cas agrees with him.

There’s commotion from behind them, and Cas checks his watch. “I think our twenty minutes are about up,” he says. “My hand really does feel better,” he adds softly, catching the back of Dean’s hand in a brief squeeze, and takes off towards the tent at a brisk pace, leaving Dean behind
blinking and stammering.

* * *

The second half of the sermon is every bit as boring as the first, but at least Dean doesn’t fall asleep this time around. It’s almost six when they finish up, enough time to grab a bite to eat before the prayer service starts, and Dean convinces Cas to try someplace new for dinner. It’s not as awkward as the night before—maybe because it’s the second time round, maybe because they’ve been at “work” together all afternoon, as it were, or maybe because the light inside the barbecue joint Dean picks is dim and smoky enough that he feels hidden and safe, so that if Cas brushes his leg up against Dean’s under the table it’s okay, because they’re tucked away in a corner and no one’s going to call them out on it.

He’s got a missed call from Dad when they leave the restaurant. Dean leans against the Impala while he listens to the message; it’s about what he expected, just a terse finish up soon and call me, I could still use your help up here. He erases the message and shoves the phone back in his pocket, discomfort at the reminder that he’s running away from his responsibilities collecting in his gut.

“Everything all right?” Cas asks when Dean gets in the car. They drove together, so that one of them at least wouldn’t have to lose their parking spot. (“You just want to show off,” Cas accused him, but Dean noticed he hadn’t needed any arm-twisting to get him in the Impala.)

“Yeah, of course. Just my editor, he wants me to check in with him. I’ll give him a call before the meeting starts.”

They have to park almost half a mile away, the place is so filled up. Lots of people who weren’t too interested in a sermon but wanted to get their hands on a miracle, Dean guesses. Like he expected. The weather’s good for a walk, though—it’s still hot and muggy, but the sun’s a little lower and there’s a generous breeze coming in from over the river.

Cas heads inside to save them seats, and Dean reluctantly punches Dad’s number into his phone, wandering off towards the river so he can talk without being overheard.

John picks up on the second ring. “Dean, you got my message?”

“Yeah, Dad. Sorry I missed your call.”

“Are you on the road?”

“Uh, no, not yet. I’m still in Kentucky checking this thing out.”

“Still? Dean, it’s been two days, what could you possibly have to be looking into?”

His chest tightens with shame and frustration. “They only hold their meetings on the weekends, so there was no one around for me to interview yesterday.”

“And waiting around until today brought you a lot of answers, did it? Look, son, what part of ‘I need your help on this hunt’ don’t you understand?”

Dean swallows. “Is it bad?”

John sighs. “It’s not your responsibility to watch my back, Dean. There’s a lot of legwork to be done, and it is your job to help out with that when I ask you.”

Right. Because Dad needs him, but he doesn’t need him. “I’m sorry.”

“Hit the road tomorrow morning, and that’s an order. If you haul ass you can be here by noon.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t let me down again, son.” There’s a click, and the line goes dead.

Dean tightens his grip around the phone and crushes his fist against his forehead. What he really wants to do is chuck the thing in the river, but shit’s expensive, and he can’t keep running away from Dad and mooch off of his credit card scams at the same time. He’s such a fucking hypocrite. He’s angry as hell at Sam for all the shit he’s pulled, but when it comes right down to it the only difference between him and his brother is that Dean doesn’t have the willpower to go through with it. Or any other viable options to turn to, because, let’s face it, putting a round through some heebie-jeebie thing is the only thing he’s actually good at.

He should just leave now, skip the whole healing service garbage, but somehow the thought of Cas patiently saving him a seat and never knowing why he didn’t come back bothers him in a way he can’t put words to, so he pockets the phone and makes his way through the crowd of people back to the main tent.
The sides are rolled up tonight, whether to let the breeze in or accommodate more people along the edges, Dean doesn’t know. Probably both. Cas is in one of the very last rows, sitting sideways with his feet up on the seat next to him. “People were disregarding my stack of papers,” he explains, swiveling his feet back to the floor. He hesitates, studying Dean carefully as he sits down. “Dean, is everything all right?”

“Yeah, everything’s cool.” Dean forces himself to grin. “Just a little disagreement with my editor, that’s all.” He looks around the tent, which is packed to the seams and more with people, all surprisingly hushed in their pre-event chatter which hangs in the air like a cicada buzz. “See, I told you, Cas: way more people interested in miracles than whatever that stuff this afternoon was.”

“You mean the fascinating synthesis of radicalized Protestant eschatology with a distinctly twentieth-century American hagiography?”

Dean blinks. “Dude, you gotta stop using fancy words like that, people are going to think you’re a nerd.”

“Oh, god forbid, an intellectual,” Cas agrees. He drops his voice. “Did you know that William Branham taught that education was the tool of the devil because it obscured the simplicity of the truth?”

“Yeah, well, sounds like he was a pretty smart guy.”

“He also believed that women were inherently evil as the direct result of Eve’s sin.”

“You mean the apple thing?”

“No, she had intercourse with Satan when he was in the form of a serpent. That’s how Cain was conceived.”

Dean nods. “Jesus Christ, Cas, that is messed up.”

Cas nods as if to say, no shit. “I’m actually somewhat surprised the movement hasn’t let go of that particular teaching. It’s not exactly good PR, as you would say.”

Dean grins. “So much for ‘the truth doesn’t matter,’ huh?”

“I’m objective, Dean. I’m not a misogynistic asshole.”

“Brothers and sisters!” Dean recognizes Brother Matthew’s voice. “Brothers and sisters, let us lift our voices!” That’s all the preamble they get before an out-of-tune upright piano which Dean hadn’t noticed before starts playing. The crowd around them joins in singing: “I love to tell the story of unseen things above; of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love!”

Dean looks at Cas, who shrugs. “I know it’s Methodist revival hymnody,” he whispers, leaning over into Dean’s shoulder. “I recognize it, but I don’t know the words. I didn’t grow up in the church.”

The audience isn’t actually a half-bad choir, Dean thinks, for a bunch of mostly old people, anyway. The guy in front of them is singing harmony in a deep bass voice. Dean crosses his arms and kind of hums along on the second verse, trying not to look too out of place.

They cycle through a couple more songs, some of which Cas says he recognizes, others which are completely foreign to him. The atmosphere starts to feel looser as they go on, everyone sort of doing their own thing—some people standing, some lifting their hands, others kneeling in prayer. The whole thing makes Dean enormously, profoundly uncomfortable, and if it weren’t for Cas standing next to him, he would have bolted before the second song. This is the weirdest fucking thing you’ve ever done in an attempt to get laid, he tells himself sternly. Weirder than Rhonda Hurley. Like, by a lot.

“I sing because I’m happy! I sing because I’m free! For His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.” The pianist drags out the last line and ends with a little flourish on the last chord.

And then, nothing happens. The place goes still—not completely quiet, a lot of people are murmuring under their breaths, but no one gets up to make an announcement or lead a prayer or anything. Everyone just sits—or stands, or kneels—in their own little world. Dean shoots Cas a questioning look, but Cas seems kind of distant, like he’s focused on working out a problem in his head. Something to do with his research, Dean figures, because if Cas can get as lost in writing as he’s seen him do, the same likely happens even without a pen in his hand. Besides, he reminds himself, Cas doesn’t know what’s going on any better than he does.

At least if no one’s doing anything he can sit quietly and not stick out like a sore thumb. He’s no sooner settled into this conclusion, though, then a man three rows ahead of them starts speaking in a loud voice, but it’s not in English—maybe it’s a real language, but for all Dean knows, it could
be complete gibberish. He’s speaking a mile a minute, babbling, and around the tent people are starting to moan and rock back and forth in their chairs. A woman in the front row starts sobbing uncontrollably, and people cluster around her, touching her back and head, and speaking over each other in a tangle of voices. Brother Matthew is in the huddle, his arms outreached and hovering over the rest of the group. His voice carries over the crowd, and Dean can catch a few words through the commotion: “...denounce this...His mighty arm...come out...demon of sickness...we refute the powers of this world...”

He can feel a weird buzz around him, like his skin is vibrating, and Dean’s not so proud that he can’t admit he’s more than a little freaked out. Everything’s gotten way too intense, and the fact that he still firmly believes it’s all a bunch of horseshit doesn’t change the fact that it’s all too loud and too close and too insane.

“Hey, Cas,” he starts, but when he turns towards him Cas is rigid in his seat, shaking slightly, his face drained white. “Cas? You okay?” If he’s as freaked out as Dean currently is, this is good, he can convince him to take off and find someplace normal to hang out. Preferably somewhere with plenty of booze, even if they do have to drive an hour to find it.

In response, Cas moans and half-slides, half-falls forward off his chair and onto his knees. “Cas? Jesus, Cas, what’s going on?” Dean grabs his arm, but Cas just moans again in response, rocking back and forth and breathing too fast.

Dean shakes his arm, but Cas doesn’t stop, doesn’t even act like he noticed. Fuck. Dean looks around, frantic, at the crowd of people around him all doing their own version of a psychotic break, and back to Cas. He can’t be, he tells himself. These people are all idiots, caught in some kind of fucking spiritual mob-mentality. Cas is smart. And objective, and a million and one other things, some of them a little weird, okay, but he’s not crazy.

He drops to the floor next to Cas, tries to find room for his elbows and knees in the cramped space between the rows of chairs. “Cas?” he tries again, softer this time. “Is this some kind of panic attack or something? Cas? You gotta talk to me, man, come on,” he pleads. Cas is muttering now, under his breath, and the words are strung together end-to-end and sloppy but it’s definitely not English. “Oh, fuck,” Dean mutters. He closes his eyes and tips his head back against the row of chairs in front of them. He’s close to panic himself, now, his brain playing an endless loop of this isn’t happening, this isn’t happening, this isn’t happening.

Dean loses track of how long he sits slumped on the floor next to Cas, waiting for this whole thing to blow over. The volume in the room rises and falls; there are cheers sometimes from one corner of the room or another—I’m healed—she can walk again—hallelujah! Other times things die down again to a sort of base-level hum, a hush over the crowd as they gear up for the next wave. Dean’s leg is pressed up against Cas’s, and he can feel him trembling still under two layers of denim. He hasn’t moved, hasn’t changed his behavior except to occasionally moan instead of mumble, barely pausing to breathe. His eyes are open and rolled up into his skull, the blue edge of his irises a barely visible crescent. Dean feels sick to his stomach.

You don’t actually know the guy, he reminds himself. Maybe all that stuff about objectivity and studious observation was a front, and he’s just as gullible as the rest of them. But he can’t convince himself of it, it just... it doesn’t seem like Cas. Letting himself think that he somehow knows this guy after barely twenty-four hours is probably the dumbest thing Dean’s done in a long while, but it’s happened, he’s fucked, and now that he trusts Cas—not just what he says or does but who he is—he’s not backing down. He doesn’t think he physically knows how. (“You’re like a fucking baby rabbit,” Dad yelled at him once, in a particularly insightful drunken haze, after Dean fell for some chick’s sob story—again—and fucked up a case on account of it, “and one of these days you’re going to imprint on a goddamn wolf and I swear to God, I am not going to do a thing to stop it when it rips your fucking throat out.”)

What this means, though, Dean realizes, the back of a metal chair digging into his shoulder and Cas’s frantic murmuring loud in his ears, is that his excuses to Dad were actually right all along: this is a hunt, it has to be. Something’s controlling these people—possessing them, maybe even, and he doesn’t know if it’s a spirit or some kind of curse or a goddamned demon, but whatever it is, he’s got an actual case on his hands, and people who need his help.

And he’s completely useless. The EMF reader’s back in the Impala, along with his gun and the rest of his weapons, because he was so goddamn sure of himself that this was nothing. He should get up and look around, he knows, and he could do it, too—he doesn’t think anyone’s too aware right now of the real world around them—except he doesn’t want to leave Cas.

He’s probably the reason you missed all the signs, a voice in the back of his head reminds him, because there had to have been signs. He should have known. You were too busy staring at his mouth and wondering what he’d taste like. Some hunter you are.

It takes a while for the commotion of the evening to die down. A few more people are healed, from what Dean can tell from his vantage point on the ground. Brother Greg eventually starts to pray in a loud, commanding voice, drowning out the crying and the scattered fragments of gibberish until eventually the whole assembly quiets. Next to Dean, Cas finally stops muttering,
his voice trailing off in a quiet whisper, the rocking slowed to a halt.

“We have felt the presence of the Spirit tonight,” Brother Greg intones. “The Spirit of God and of His people, and of the power and blessings He showers down upon those who truly believe in Him. Children, go from this place in that love, and in that power, and be bold to believe and to share the good news you have received. The Scriptures tell us that when Jesus healed ten men of leprosy, only one returned to give thanks, only one spread the news of the blessing he had been given. Children, do not be those other nine men. Do not hide your light under a bushel but instead, put it on a stand that it may give light to the whole earth!”

The crowd throws back an amen and hallelujah, and Brother Matthew picks up the microphone to give some logistics for tomorrow’s meetings, again encouraging anyone who likes to come and speak with him or one of the other brothers. Dean is barely paying attention, though, because Cas has finally stopped shaking and opens his eyes, blinking a bunch of times and looking around himself in confusion.

“Hey, Cas?”

“Dean, what are we—” Cas closes his mouth on the words, suddenly, and gets unsteadily to his feet. “I need some air,” he blurs out, and turns to push through the crowd.

“Cas, wait!” Dean scrambles up and stumbles after him, swearing under his breath as blood rushes back into his legs, numb from being folded underneath him for so long. He hobbles on one foot until the pins and needles stop, and in that time Cas is way ahead of him, his messy brown hair barely visible among the crowd.

Dean elbows his way past groups of crying and hugging people, and scans back and forth for Cas once he finally breaks free of the last of the crowd. There. A figure bent over next to a solitary clump of trees by the river. Dean books it over to him.

Cas is leaning forward with his hands on his knees, his shoulders shaking as he vomits quietly into the grass. Dean hangs back a step or two to give him some privacy.

“I’m fine,” Cas says without looking up, his voice even raspier than usual.

“Yeah, you really look it.”

Cas wipes the back of his hand across his mouth and straightens. “Dean, I’m serious.”

“So am I, Cas,” he fires back. “Look, I can give you some space, but you gotta work with me here, man. I don’t know what the hell just happened back in there.”

“And you think I do?” Cas’s voice is frantic, and Dean can hear him start to breathe too fast and too heavy.

“Woah, woah, Cas, take it easy.” He shoots forward, gets a hand around Cas’s waist. The other man sags into him, and he stumbles a little under his weight. “Hey, let’s maybe find some place not here to sit down, okay?”

Dean leads them over closer to the river bank, and Cas sinks down onto the ground as if his strings have been cut. He buries his face in his hands and tries to even out his breathing. Dean settles next to him, uncertain whether to touch or not and finally settling for resting his knee against Cas’s, light pressure just so that he knows he’s there.
“Cas, do you remember anything?” he asks slowly, once it becomes clear that Cas isn’t going to make the first move.

“Yes,” Cas’s voice is muffled by his hands, but he sounds calmer. “Most of it. It was…overwhelming.”

“Like something was controlling you?”

“No. It’s hard to explain.” Cas looks up, but not at Dean. “Like…like I was giving up control to something else, but something that made me…more myself. Stronger.”

“Like a really intense trip or something?”

Cas shrugs. “I suppose?”

“What triggered it? Did someone say something or, I don’t know, slip you something weird?”

Cas finally turns to look at him. “You think I was drugged, or hypnotized, or something. I know you do, you don’t believe in any of this,” he says, defensively.

“Yes, but you don’t either, or didn’t, right?”

“That’s not—” Cas stops, then tries again. “Dean, I don’t know what’s going on right now, but I have to keep an open mind, all right? And I can’t do that when you’re judging me.”

“I’m not, Cas, I swear,” Dean pleads. “I’m just worried about you, okay?” More than I should be.

Cas takes a deep, shaky breath. “Would you mind walking me back to my car, please?”

“Yeah, sure thing.” He gets to his feet and offers Cas a hand, but he brushes it aside. Cas walks on his own all the way back to where his car is parked along the side of the road, through the quickly setting dark past the milling crowd of people still talking and crying and exclaiming over the evening’s events. Seven people healed, do you think that’s a new record? I heard a blind woman got her sight back! Seven is a holy number, right? Seven days of creation, seven times around the walls of Jericho—seven seals—

They reach Cas’s car, and he fumbles in his pocket for the keys. “Thank you, Dean,” he says, and starts to unlock the door.

“Cas, wait.” Dean shoots out an arm against the car door, and Cas pauses. “Look, Cas, I just…I’m on your side, okay? I don’t know what the hell happened back there and it kind of scared the bejeezus out of me, but I mean it. I just want to make sure you’re okay. I, uh,” he stumbles, the air between them suddenly feeling too thick, “I need you to be okay, Cas.”

Cas takes in a shuddering breath. “Dean, please, I can’t do this right now. Not tonight.”
Dean swallows hard, his face flushing. “Cas, I wasn’t—”

“You were,” Cas answers patiently. “And I am. But I…” He turns the key in the lock. “I have a headache, and I need to sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He drives away, merging into the sea of cars moving slowly away from the swarm of people around the main tent, still brightly lit from the inside. Dean kicks at the dirt and starts the long walk back to the Impala. You are in way too deep, he warns himself, but it’s too late by half. Something’s going on, and he doesn’t have a clue in hell what it is, but he’ll be fucked if he lets it drag Cas down with it.
Dean hits the local library Saturday morning like it’s his religion. The doors don’t even open for another ten minutes, but he’s outside on the concrete steps with a half-finished coffee and a bag of doughnuts. He didn’t sleep too well last night, still shaken from the events at the prayer meeting and agonizing over what he was going to tell Dad, when. He picked the easy way out, sending a text this morning with what he hoped was the right balance of reasonable suspicion and self-assured confidence. He’d thought originally about saying it seemed like mass possessions going on—which is mostly true, it’s at least one of his theories—but decided better of it when he realized Dad would probably drop everything in Ohio and come down and join him, which is the absolute last thing he wants. It’s probably selfish, Dean acknowledges, to prioritize his interest in Cas over keeping him safe, but it’s not like he can’t handle the situation. He’s a fucking great hunter, and if somehow this whole thing were to go sideways badly, he doesn’t need the guilt of having dragged Dad into it hanging over him.

Anyway, Dad will probably get pissed and call him sometime this morning, but he’s got to have the ringer on silent since he’ll be in the library. It’s cowardly, yeah, but it works.

The other text he wrote this morning is still sitting in the drafts folder, and he looks it over now as he waits, chewing at his lower lip in indecision. It feels desperate, and pathetic, and while he thinks objectively that maybe it isn’t either of those things, it’s a completely appropriate and friendly gesture, that only does so much to quell the lurching in his stomach as he reads over the message:

To: Cas  
hey its Dean  
sry about being a jerk last night & hope ur feeling better.  
lunch?

He hits send before he can overthink it any more, and shoves the phone deep in his pocket.

It’s finally ten, and a middle-aged lady with a frizzy blond perm comes to open up the doors. “Well, someone’s an eager beaver!” she exclaims. “No food in the library though, I’m afraid.”

“Can I keep ‘em on me if I promise not to eat any?” Dean asks, giving her his I-can-get-anything-I-want grin, and she relents.

He gets a computer login code from the front desk and directions to the local history section. The library’s pretty simple, just one large room with high ceilings and old brick-orange carpet straight out of the 70s. There’s no air conditioning, and already the room is starting to get muggy. “Is it usually this hot still in September?” he asks the librarian while she’s showing him over to the computers.

“Not when I was growing up,” she answers. “Must be that ‘global warming’ they’re all talking about.”

The computer takes ages to boot up, but the Internet speed’s not too bad for a little local library. Dean searches for The Message Movement first—he’s not convinced they’re exactly the culprits here, more likely someone or something in this particular group, but he’s not sure where else to start. Their official website is mostly filled with links to recordings of William Branham’s sermons, with a few pages devoted to specific teachings of the group. He finds the thing about Eve and Satan that Cas had mentioned the night before—still just as fucked up, but most of the rest seems to be your basic repent, do good, don’t go to hell formula. Nothing to suggest a connection to the occult or dabbling in witchcraft or anything like that. There’s some general talk about demons, sure, but in a very traditional hellfire-and-brimstone kind of way, and besides, he’s pretty sure demons are rare at best.

There’s also a bunch of websites that are anti-Message: Cult Watch, Debunking the Message Movement, Is William Branham a False Prophet? Most of them are super religious in their own right, and none of them suggests any actually shadiness—even the Cult Watch site acknowledges that, while they’re a little bit weird (a lot weird, if you ask Dean), they’re not technically a cult in the literal sense of the word. So that’s a dead-end, too.

He sneaks a bite from one of the doughnuts (yeah, he lied; sue him), and opens up another search page. William Branham, he types this time, and a lot of the same sites as before pop up. There’s a Wikipedia article a couple of hits down, and he clicks on that first. Basic stuff, he already knows —lead a revival ministry, supposedly healed people, founded the Message movement. Turns out he was actually born in Burkesville, which can’t be a coincidence, but it might just explain why the meetings are happening here and not some other po-dunk town. Maybe it’s some kind of revivalist Mecca.

He scrolls through the stuff about Branham’s teaching, and it turns out the guy was even weirder than previously advertised. Still nothing weird weird, though, until the last section of the
biography catches his eye:

While traveling through northern Texas with his family on the evening of December 18, 1965, Branham’s car was hit head-on by a vehicle that drifted over from the opposite lane. While the rest of the family was unharmed, Branham was seriously injured. He was rushed to the hospital in Amarillo, Texas, where he died on Christmas Eve.

Branham’s followers, however, convinced that Branham would need to return from the dead to lead his final tent vision, initially refused to allow his body to be buried. After Easter Sunday came and went with no resurrection, Branham was finally interred on April 11, 1966, in the town of Jeffersonville, Indiana, where his first tent revivals took place.

Yeah, that definitely qualifies as out-of-the-ordinary, his-kind-of-weird weird. Because there’s no recipe for restless spirit quite like unfinished business plus delayed burial. Possession and miracles seem a bit unusual, though—that’s not exactly your run-of-the-mill ghost activity, but for a guy who devoted his life to that kind of thing, maybe it’s right on the money. He didn’t stick around long enough to see through his “tent vision” in his lifetime (Dean’s still a little shaky on exactly what that’s supposed to entail), so he’s trying to make it happen after death.

If nothing else, it’s definitely more of a lead than he had to go on before. Dean takes another bite of doughnut, wipes the powdered sugar off his fingers and on his jeans, and types ghost possession into another search box.

* * *

“Seriously, Dad, I’m not making this up. It’s right there on Wikipedia and there’s a bunch of old newspaper articles to back it up.”

“Alright, son, calm down. If you’re this surprised your research turned up anything, why’d you take the case in the first place?”

It’s a rhetorical question more than anything else, a sharp jab to make sure he knows he’s not making it through entirely under the radar on this one, so Dean just lets it go. He’s sitting on the bottom step outside the library, speaking softly despite the fact that there aren’t many patrons coming in right now. Too close to lunchtime. “What I can’t figure, though, is how it’s doing what it’s doing, and why. I mean, I wasn’t affected by it, and probably there were other people who were still, I dunno, mostly normal?”

“Probably? You weren’t paying attention?”

“People were really worked up, it was kind of hard to tell who was actual-crazy and who was just flipping out on their own.”

“And how do you know it wasn’t just everyone over-reacting? Mass hysteria is easily self-manufactured, Dean. I agree, you dug up a strange death that might be connected, but you don’t have any evidence yet of how the spirit is controlling people. Which also means you have no way to stop it, even if it is a spirit like you think.”

“Look, I’ve been getting information from this guy.” Dean tries to keep his voice casual, praying his dad won’t pick up on any kind of subtext in his words. Relax, he tells himself. He doesn’t know about any of that, so he’s never going to guess because he’s not looking for it. It doesn’t much help, though. “He’s doing research, like academic sort of stuff on these meetings, and he’s level-headed. You know, logical egghead type,” he says, even though egghead is probably the last word he’d use to describe Cas. “And he was possessed or whatever last night—speaking in tongues, shaking, the whole nine yards. Plus… I don’t know, Dad, it was just weird, like there was this kind of buzz in the air or something.”

“EMF readings?”

Shit. “Uh, no, I didn’t have the reader on me.”

John swears. “Jesus Christ, Dean, are you working a goddamn case or not?”

“Yes, sir.” He waits through his dad’s silence, picking paint off the railing where it’s starting to peel back.

“Spirit possession isn’t out of the question, and a particularly restless spirit could probably work itself up to a strength that could at least mimic miraculous events, especially if it’s been unchecked for as long as this one would have been. You’ll need to find what’s holding it here, though, and hope to god it’s something physical rather than just unfinished business. After that, salt and burn, the usual drill. I don’t think you’d need anything more complicated than that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get it done, and stop being dumb about it, son. Don’t think I don’t know you’re dragging your
heels about getting up here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Alright, call if you need anything.”

Dean ends the call and snaps his phone closed, tosses it onto the pile of papers next to him on the step to keep them from blowing away. They’re computer print-outs mostly, anything he could find on mass possession by a restless spirit, plus a couple of photocopies from local history books. He was hoping he’d find an address for Branham’s birthplace, but “small log cabin on the outskirts of town” is about as exact as anything gets.

His phone rings, and he swears, because hasn’t Dad chewed him out enough already for one afternoon? The caller ID says it’s Cas, though, and his heart jumps a little as he answers. “Hello?”

“Dean? This is Cas.”

“Yeah, hi.”

“I just saw your message. I know I’m responding quite late, but if you haven’t already gone to lunch…?” He lets it hang in the air like a question.

“Uh, no, I got caught up in some research and was just heading out. Meet you at the diner in, say, ten minutes?”

“I’ll be there,” Cas says, and hangs up.

* * *

The diner’s crowded with the lunchtime rush, oscillating fans in each corner of the room blowing sticky air around the room. Jackie is working the floor again, and she gives Dean a thousand-watt smile when she sees him. “Glad to see you’re still in town,” she says. “Take a seat up at the counter if you like.”

“Thanks, but I’m actually meeting someone.” He scans the tables, but there’s no sign of Cas yet.

“Well then, there’s a booth in the corner that just opened up. Head on over there and I’ll swing by for your drink order in a minute.”

A couple minutes later Cas comes in the door, followed by a young woman who Dean doesn’t recognize until it becomes clear that she’s with Cas as the two of them approach his table.

“I’m sorry, we got held up. Dean, I don’t remember if you’ve met Aimee?” Cas asks, as he stands aside to let her slide into the booth across from Dean.

“You too,” Aimee smiles back. She’s got a Southern accent and a young, thin face—a thin all of her, actually. She’s willowy, like she’d fall over in a stiff breeze.

Cas settles into the booth next to her, pushing sweat-stuck strands of hair back from his forehead and looking generally miserable. “No air conditioning in those revival tents, huh?” Dean jokes.

“Not yet. Nice to meet you,” Dean says with a smile, offering her his hand, and he’s proud of himself for being so smooth and polite because his inner monologue is kind of throwing a bitch-fit right now. It’s not like he said this was a date, but still, he and Cas have a…well, not a history because it’s been a total of, what, forty-eight hours? So, a thing then. Whatever it is.

“You too,” Aimee smiles back. She’s got a Southern accent and a young, thin face—a thin all of her, actually. She’s willowy, like she’d fall over in a stiff breeze.

Cas blinks. “There weren’t any meetings this morning. I was with Aimee, discussing…questions I have about the movement,” he stammers, as if Dean doesn’t know exactly what he’s got questions about.

“Oh, Cool,” he answers flatly.

Aimee beams and elbows Cas gently. “I think it’s wonderful that Cas is so interested in our message,” she says. “Not everyone is willing to take us so seriously.”

“Hm, wonder why.”

“Dean,” Cas fucking scolds him, and Dean’s saved from coming up with an appropriate retort by Jackie and her armful of menus.

“Can I get y’all started off with some cold drinks?” she chirps, and they order two iced teas and a Pepsi between them. Cas hides in the menu once she leaves, avoiding eye contact with Dean entirely.

“Cas says you’re a reporter?” Aimee asks, drumming her fingers on the menu in front of her.
“Yeah, for a paper down in Tennessee,” he answers. He’s officially bored with this cover story, and apparently his tone of voice communicates that, because she just shrugs and goes back to her menu.

“And you’re, what, some sort of spiritual guide for Cas now? A guru?”

Cas’s head shoots up. “That’s incredibly offensive, Dean, a guru is a teacher in the Hindu faith, you can’t just throw that word around to whomever you like.”

“Whatever.” Dean rolls his eyes.

“And I’m not a ‘guide,’ or whatever,” Aimee adds. She does the little air quotes around the word, too. *Christ, she and Cas are perfect for each other.* “I’m just a friend, and Cas had questions. Besides, women aren’t allowed to teach or hold positions of leadership in the Message Movement.”

Dean stares. “And that doesn’t bother you?”

Aimee shrugs. “Maybe I don’t need to boss other people around in order to feel important.”

Great. This is turning out perfectly, absolutely the pick-me-up he needed in the middle of his day. “Where the hell is our waitress?” Dean mumbles under his breath, and stares at the menu like he doesn’t already know he’s ordering a cheeseburger.

Jackie, thankfully, shows up in the next minute with drinks, and takes their orders: Dean’s cheeseburger, no pickle; a tuna melt for Cas, and a cobb salad for Aimee. She bats her eyelashes at Dean as she takes his order, and he’s pissed enough at Cas and this whole situation that he momentarily ignores the fact that she has a husband and passes the menus back to her with a wink and a “thank you, sweetheart.”

“You were doing research this morning?” Cas asks casually, sipping at his ice tea.

“Yeah. Historical background on the movement, that kind of thing. Did you know Branham was actually born here, in Burkesville?”

Cas looks surprised. “No, I had no idea. But I suppose that might explain why the group chose to settle here.”

“And why things are going so well,” Aimee adds. “I mean, not to put down other branches of the movement, but no one’s had as much success bringing in new followers as we have. Or as many miracles.”

“You think that makes a difference?” Dean asks her. “Like, what, his spirit’s still lingering around here or something?”

Cas huffs exasperatedly. “Dean, enough already. I know you don’t believe any of this, but could you please stop being so goddamn condescending?”

“What?” Dean spreads his hands out in surrender. “Dude, I was just asking—”

“They have faith, Dean, that doesn’t mean they believe in ghost stories.”

“I thought it was a fair question!”

“I did, too,” Aimee cuts in, like she’s coming to Dean’s defense, and fuck her for thinking he needs that. “I don’t believe in ghosts, exactly, but in life after death, of course. And Brother Branham was a powerful prophet. Places where Jesus walked in Palestine are supposed to have miraculous properties, why should this be any different?”

“See?”

Cas sighs. “Alright, I’m sorry. I just—” He sounds exhausted, like he hasn’t slept in days, and now that Dean looks a little more closely he can see dark circles under his eyes. “I’m going to go wash my hands before we eat,” he says, excusing himself from the table. Dean watches him go, studying him for anything that looks out of the ordinary—well, more spirit-possession out-of-the-ordinary, at any rate—but all he sees in the set of Cas’s shoulders is that he’s tired, and maybe a little bit scared, and Dean’s suddenly pissed at himself, because how did Aimee showing up throw him off balance so badly that he forgot that Cas is in danger here?

“So Cas didn’t tell me how you two know each other,” Aimee says. Dean spins back around to face her, and from the smirk around her lips he can tell she noticed him staring.
“Professionally,” he answers. “How did you get involved with the movement, anyhow?” he asks, to forestall any further questions about his and Cas’s relationship.

“I was born into it,” Aimee says, brushing her hair back from her face. “My dad was an elder before he died. Brother Matthew’s my uncle, I live with him now.”

“So you, what, grew up in a tent or something?”

“Cas was right, you are rude.” She makes a face and sips at her tea. “We don’t live in tents, idiot, that’s just where we hold meetings. But yes, we moved around a lot when I was growing up.”

Dean’s hit by memories of a childhood of living out of duffle bags and the trunk of the Impala, and realizes for the first time how young Aimee is. He’d thought Sam’s age before, but now he’d be surprised if she was even in her twenties yet.

“Yeah, well, me too,” he offers, by way of apology. “Hey, about what we were talking about before, Branham being born around here—you wouldn’t happen to know exactly where, would you?”

“Not exactly. I know it was a log cabin, though, so the building’s probably not even standing anymore, wherever it is.”

Damn. Early twentieth century, though, it was a long shot and he knew it. The building being gone doesn’t mean there’s nothing that could be holding the spirit there anymore, though, Dean knows. It just means it got about a thousand times harder to find.

“Did you want a picture or something, for your story?”

“Uh, yeah. Figured it’d be a nice touch.”

“Just use a stock photo of any run-down shack.” Cas is back from washing his hands, and he slides into the booth without looking at Dean. “It’s not like your readers are going to know the difference.”

Dean bristles. “Yeah, well there’s this little thing called journalistic integrity, Cas.”

Cas just rolls his eyes. “Right, right. I forgot how much you care about the truth.”

Dean leans forward and tries to catch Cas’s gaze. He keeps his voice low and gentle, like he learned to do growing up when Dad had one drink too many and started talking about how quickly the foundation of a house caught fire. “Cas, seriously, what’s going on?”

Cas looks up sharply. “Food’s here,” he says in a monotone, and sure enough Jackie is at Dean’s elbow in the next minute, passing out their plates and offering refills on drinks.

Neither Dean nor Cas says much for the rest of the meal. Aimee keeps up a pretty consistent stream of chatter, mostly about the movement—how elders get chosen, the first miracle she ever saw (broken arm, three years ago in West Virginia), some teenage gossip about which kids in the group have been caught drinking or making out.

Dean takes out his frustration on his cheeseburger, which is badly overdone, and Cas picks gingerly at his tuna melt. He’s not even through one of his sandwich halves by the time Aimee’s done eating, which is particularly remarkable given her almost non-stop one-sided conversation. She excuses herself to use the bathroom, and Cas and Dean are left with nothing to cover up the awkward silence that’s descended between them.

Cas finally pushes his plate away with a sigh. “You’re not finishing that?” Dean asks.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Cas, you took maybe three bites. Are you feeling okay?”

“I said, I’m not hungry.”

“Cas.” Dean scrunches his napkin up into a ball and makes a fist around it. “Come on, you gotta talk to me.”

“Why?” Cas crosses his arms and levels a glare at him. “So you can make fun of me?”

“When have I done that? You’re right, this religion stuff weirds me out, but Jesus, Cas, I’m trying, okay?”

Cas’s face falls, and he lets his head drop into his hands, elbows balanced on the table. “Shit,” he mumbles. It’s a while before he speaks again, and when he does he still doesn’t look at Dean. “I know I’m being defensive. I apologize. But I’m panicking, Dean, I don’t know what to do.”
“Yeah, I get it.”

“No you don’t.” Cas looks up, angry, and suddenly he’s talking a mile a minute, under his breath and barely contained. “You see everything in black and white, Dean. You’ve already sorted your world into those categories: this thing is right, this is wrong, miracles don’t happen, God doesn’t exist. I can’t do that. I have to be objective and go where the evidence leads me, even if it frightens me, even if it’s not something I ever expected or wanted to find, because being objective doesn’t mean I don’t have beliefs, too, I just—I let myself get shaken, Dean. I have to, that’s my job.”

“Oh, but why can’t you let this one go? I’m not saying it’s not real,” Dean says quickly as Cas bristles, “but just…why do you have to follow every lead? I mean, it’s obviously upsetting you, man.”

“I’m not upset.”

“Bullshit you’re not upset. Look, all I’m saying—” He pauses, choosing his words carefully. “All I’m saying is even if it’s real, that doesn’t mean it’s a good thing.”

Cas sets his lips in a stern line. “And what makes you the judge of that?” he snaps. “You don’t like it—I get it, fine. But this is my research project, and I need to carry it forward in whatever way I judge is best.”

“Research, right, like Ken Kesey dropping acid was research.”

“It’s immersive personal experience, and I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” Cas digs his wallet out of his pocket and slaps a twenty down on the table. “I’m leaving.”

“Fine.” Dean reaches for his own wallet. “You and Aimee have a wonderful afternoon getting freaky with the Holy Spirit.”

“You’re such a child,” Cas accuses, and Dean can’t think of a single thing to say that doesn’t prove Cas’s point, so he drops his money on the table and leaves. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Aimee coming back to the table, and he pushes past people to get to the door so that he won’t have to hear whatever excuse Cas gives her for his sudden departure.

* * *

His anger fuels him through an afternoon spent stomping around the woods south of town with the EMF reader, poking around for any signs of a run-down homestead or spirit activity in general. It’s a complete bust, and after three hours he’s covered in sweat and mosquito bites. The woods are dense and green and in this heat and humidity, it feels almost subtropical.

Dean calls it quits around five, stumbling out of the underbrush and back into the little clearing on the side of the road where he parked the Impala. He props the trunk open and rummages around for a towel and water to clean himself up. Scrubbing at the back of his neck, he takes stock of the situation. Unless he can find someone in the movement who actually knows where Branham was born, this is a complete dead end. He’s never going to find the place just wandering around on his own. So, if Branham’s ghost is tethered to some sort of physical object, it’s got to be actually with the movement, an old keepsake or relic or something, or he’s totally fucked. Dean groans and tosses the towel back in the trunk. He knew he wasn’t going to be able to avoid the meetings forever, but after the shitshow that was lunch with Cas today, he’s even less eager to show up and risk pissing him off again.

He’s not trying to make him angry, is the thing—hell, he was trying to be as understanding as possible, although Aimee being there didn’t exactly help his mood. It’s stupid of him to be jealous; for one thing, Aimee’s young, like possibly even ten years younger than Cas, and it’s not like he and Cas have a—an anything to be jealous on account of.

There’s a strangely persistent ache in his gut, though, when he thinks about Cas shaking on the floor of the revival tent last night, or the panicked look on his face when he slipped back into himself; this feeling that says protect and comfort and also please let him want to kiss me, and it’s so embarrassing and hopeless that it just makes him angrier. At Cas, partly, but mostly at himself, because after everything with Cassie he should know better.

He gets into the driver’s seat and turns up the radio, loud, so he can listen to Alice in Chains instead of having to think.

The meeting grounds are quiet when he gets there, although the line of cars looks even longer than yesterday. Word must have gotten around, and fast, about the higher number of miracle healings, and people are hoping for a repeat performance tonight. Dean makes his way over to the main tent, which looks as if it’s exploded, all four of the sides rolled up so that extra chairs and blankets can be gathered along the edges. He joins a cluster of people along the left side, the EMF reader turned on in his pocket, but it doesn’t register anything.
Brother Matthew is speaking today, and as far as Dean can gather, his topic is the disastrous rise of the Catholic church and the impending apocalypse. Uplifting stuff. What’s even more fucked up is that Dean recognizes what the guy is talking about, it’s one of Branham’s “seven seals” that signal the end of civilization, and he knows that because he spent all morning reading this shit. People are crazy, man—give him pissed off spirits and werewolves any day of the week over this.

He scans the crowd, but he can’t see Cas anywhere.

Waiting for Brother Matthew’s sermon to end feels like the longest twenty minutes of Dean’s life, but he’s finally wrapping it up and, again, encouraging anyone with questions to come forward to speak with him or another of the brothers. Dean applauds along with the rest of the crowd, and moves towards the front of the tent as people start to filter out, making his way over to the line of people waiting to talk to Brother Matthew.

“Welcome, friend!” Brother Matthew says when it’s finally Dean’s turn to talk with him. “Did I see you with us yesterday at our evening meeting as well?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“So, what did you think, Brother…?”

It takes Dean a long moment to realize he’s being asked for his name. “Oh, uh, Joe,” he stammers, going for the handshake. “And yeah, it was…um, intense.”

Brother Matthew laughs. “Well, that’s the spirit of the Lord for you, my friend. Doesn’t do things by halves.”

“Yeah, I guess not.” Dean fake-laughs along with him. “So, I’ve been reading about Bran—uh, Brother Branham—you know, trying to learn more about the man behind the movement.” Brother Matthew smiles, but it’s the kind of thin smile that’s all lips and doesn’t reach his eyes. “He was born around here, right?”

“Yes.”

“No, not like, here here, right, like where we’re standing?”

“N—no?” Brother Matthew looks puzzled.

“So all his stuff just got, what, thrown away somewhere? None of his kids kept keepsakes or anything?”

“Joe, were you raised Catholic by any chance?”

“Uh...yes?” Dean decides to go with it, since it’s obviously easier than explaining what he’s actually after. *Remember how you said Branham’s spirit is “with us”? Well about that...*

Brother Matthew sighs. “I thought so. You see, you’re talking about relics—the collection and worship of objects that the saints leave behind: Mary’s veil, a bone from one of the apostles, that sort of thing? They’re all falsehoods, Joe. Brother Branham’s spirit is with us in his teachings and the gift of truth, not objects.”

“So Joe, obviously not.” Dean laughs it off. *So much for that theory.*

“Joe, what can I help you with?”

“I was just wondering about his legacy? I mean, obviously, the movement, that’s the big one, but, what about his family? Or any, I don’t know, important possessions?”

Brother Matthew is officially frowning now. “Those aren’t things that we value, Joe. Brother Branham’s spirit is with us in his teachings and the gift of truth, not objects.”

“So, any of his stuff just got, what, thrown away somewhere? None of his kids kept keepsakes or anything?”

“Joe, were you raised Catholic by any chance?”

“Uh...yes?” Dean decides to go with it, since it’s obviously easier than explaining what he’s actually after. *Remember how you said Branham’s spirit is “with us”? Well about that...*

Brother Matthew sighs. “I thought so. You see, you’re talking about relics—the collection and worship of objects that the saints leave behind: Mary’s veil, a bone from one of the apostles, that sort of thing? They’re all falsehoods, Joe, and chasing after those sort of material assurances only leads to idolatry.” He claps a hand on Dean’s shoulder. “Brother Branham’s teachings, and the movement: those are all you need, son.”

“Right, but—” Dean tries, but Brother Matthew is already giving him a little nudge to the side and moving on to the next person in line.

Dean waits until he’s a good twenty feet away from the meeting tent and hopefully out of earshot before he swears. He’s convinced Brother Matthew is lying—the guy was acting so shifty, he’s got to be hiding something. Meaning he might be in on the whole thing, which is a whole other level of shit to deal with. Dean had been giving the movement the benefit of the doubt before, operating under the assumption that Branham’s spirit was completely self-guided and that the “brothers” were just as duped as everyone else. This makes sense, though: the spirit is bound to some kind of object, and someone like Brother Matthew figures out how to control it—perform a few miracles, draw in more people. And now the miracles are growing, which means, best case scenario, he’s amping up his game—worst case, he’s in over his head and Branham’s spirit is taking things into its own hands, and last night was only the beginning.
Alternative solution, the guy is telling the truth and they really don’t give a shit about personal possessions. But in that case, they genuinely might not know where any of his things are, including whatever the spirit’s attached to, and that’s a dead-end situation Dean just can’t work with. Besides: Branham’s ghost is here, which means the object, whatever it is, has got to be here as well. He just needs to know what he’s looking for.

Dean surveys the area and notices a couple of smaller tents set up behind the main tent. There’s a bunch of little kids running in and out of one of them, a couple of women, one of them heavily pregnant, talking by the entrance. That’s probably a bust, then, but two men in gray button-downs are carrying piles of tracts and Bibles into a second tent. Camp headquarters, probably, but with the meeting just out there’s too much activity for him to sneak in and poke around with the EMF reader. Better to try and interview some of the attendees first, see if anyone has information that could be useful. Then, once everyone’s in the prayer meeting this evening, he can investigate a little more freely.

A bunch of people have taken off already, but there’s nearly as many who have stuck around, congregating in clumps on the field, some of them with picnic dinners spread out. Dean’s stomach growls, and he weighs the merits of trying to mooch off of a group with food versus resigning himself to being hungry. He should have eaten more at lunch, let Cas be the one to storm out of there in a rush. He hesitates, then heads towards a circle of young women with a spread of different mayo-drenched salads and what looks like it might be a platter of fried chicken, because God didn’t give him this pretty face for nothing.

Forty minutes, two drumsticks, and some questionable potato salad later, Dean has a full stomach but absolutely no leads. The women, it turns out, are college students from out of town and only just arrived this afternoon. Jill, a petite redhead with the thickest Louisiana drawl Dean’s ever heard, is going through a “journey of spiritual rediscovery,” with her friends along for moral support, but after the sermon they just sat through all four of them are having doubts. “It just seems a bit off, you know?” Alexa says, packing up the empty tupperware. “Like, they’re very sincere and I bet they’re all really good people, but some of the stuff they believe is just really weird.”

“Well yeah, but some of the stuff everyone believes is really weird,” Jill counters. “Catholics think that communion bread turns into Jesus’s body when you eat it—like, literally, you’re eating human flesh—and there are still, like, millions of Catholics and no one thinks they’re a weird ‘fringe’ group.”

Alexa shrugs. “I guess. We’ll see what the prayer time tonight is like. I hope it’s not too freaky. It’s not freaky, is it?” she asks Dean.

He’s not really sure how to respond, so he lies and says that this is his first night there, too. He should have known they weren’t regulars, from the way they dressed at the very least—they’re all wearing jeans and those flow-y shirts that are really popular right now. Jill even has a pixie cut, which from as far as he can tell is a serious taboo for women who are actually in the movement. But they’re hot, and they had food, and honestly for as crappy as today has been on so many levels, Dean really doesn’t feel too bad about it.

He chats with them for a little while longer, until people start to move towards the main tent again, and then makes some excuse to head back to his car. It would probably be less conspicuous, he knows, to join the crowd at the back of the tent and then slip away, but he really doesn’t want to run into Cas right now if he can help it. He’s surprised enough that he hasn’t seen him yet that he almost wonders if he’s not here, but that doesn’t seem to square with the “immersive personal experience” Cas was talking about at lunch. He’ll be here, Dean knows, and it eats at him that he couldn’t talk Cas out of it. He has no idea how dangerous this situation is, or how quickly it could turn into something way worse—if a ghost is powerful enough to heal people, it could probably turn the tables and hurt just as easily, right? But Cas is a grown up, and practically a stranger, and he can’t boss him around, much as he would like to drag his stubborn ass away from here.

Dean waits until he can hear music coming from the main tent, then heads back over to where the wash of artificial light covering the worshipers is starting to take over from the setting sun. He joins in at the edge of the crowd, slowly moving forward by a row or two every few minutes, blending in. There’s probably no point in bothering, everyone’s attention is so focused on the singing. He sees Cas finally, standing a couple of rows back from the front, with Aimee at his side. Dean’s heart twinges. Aimee is utterly lost in the music, swaying back and forth with her hands held up over her head, but Cas looks out of place and strangely apprehensive, his hands shoved deep in his pockets and a tension in his shoulders so obvious Dean can see it from his spot on the outside edge of the gathering. Cas closes his eyes and folds his arms across his chest, rolling his shoulders back as if to lessen some of the tension, and Dean forces himself to look away and keep moving forward. He’ll be fine, he tells himself, even though he knows there’s no guarantee that’s true, and fuck all he can do about it if it’s not.

It takes him one more song to make it to the front of the tent and away from the gathering. He gets stuck near the first row for a long while, next to an old lady who’s hugging a tattered Bible to her chest and swaying back and forth, a blissed-out smile on her face. The crowd gathered at the edges of the tent is thinned out this far forward, leaving Dean right in the pianist’s line of sight. He
waits until the final chorus, and when Brother Matthew walks over to whisper some kind of instructions to the pianist, Dean makes a dash for it.

His James Bond-level stealth moves are a complete waste of time, though, because there’s nothing interesting in the smaller tents. He turns over every corner twice, poking around with flashlight and EMF reader, but there are no readings, not even a blip. And nothing suspicious looking either, EMF readings aside. The first tent is mostly full of Bibles and tracts stacked in cardboard boxes. There’s a plastic folding table and a couple of chairs up against the far side of the tent, but the only interesting things there are an old tape player with a bunch of cassettes labeled as Branham’s sermons, and a small first-aid kit. The other tent is equally a bust: a carton of kid’s toys and a bunch of snacks, that’s it.

Fuck. Seriously, fuck. Dean punches the air angrily. If this fake case had to go and turn into a real thing, couldn’t it at least have been something simple? He’s running out of easy options here, and starting to second-guess himself. There are probably other reasons for mass hysteria, right, like weird molds and shit? He vaguely remembers Sammy doing a school project on the Salem witch trials when he was in high school, and explaining to Dean that the most likely explanation was some sort of fungus that got into the town’s wheat supply or something like that, so that essentially everyone was high without realizing it. Dean had thought that was hilarious, until Sam had snapped that it wasn’t so funny for the twenty people who died as a result, and at the time Dean just shrugged it off, but now that feels a little less distant. His stomach twists again when he thinks about Cas and everyone else in that tent right now, with who knows what controlling them, and he heads back out into the field.

The main tent is now lit up from inside against the night sky, and through the one solid panel at the very front of the tent he can see the silhouettes of the crowd inside, shaking and raising their arms. “Cast out this demon!” Brother Matthew’s voice carries over the commotion. If he’s really controlling the spirit, then maybe whatever object he’s got to tether Branham’s ghost is with him right now. Dean feels a flash of hope, and irritation with himself for only thinking of something as obvious as this just now. He’s already seen one meeting, of course, but he’d been so preoccupied with Cas last night that he really didn’t pay attention to anyone else. He pockets the EMF reader and flashlight, and circles around to the side of the tent so he can get a better look.

The scene inside the tent is complete chaos. Dean doesn’t know if it’s just that much crazier than last night, or if his vantage point from the floor yesterday masked the full extent of the atmosphere. People are crying, shouting, shaking in their seats. Brother Matthew is kneeling in front of an older man in the front of the tent, his hand pressed to the other man’s forehead and a stream of barely comprehensible words pouring out of his mouth. Dean cranes his neck to try to get a better look, but there are too many people crowded around the pair and he can’t see Brother Matthew’s other hand to know if he’s holding something that could be suspicious. He looks for Cas, and finds him just in time to see him stumble forward, catching hold of the woman in front of him as he slumps to the ground.

Dean surges toward him instinctively, but there’s twenty or thirty mesmerized worshipers between him and Cas, and it’s all he can do to keep him in his line of sight. Cas looks dazed, but not quite as out of it as he had been yesterday. His eyes are unfocused, but at least they’re not rolled up into his skull. His hand is still on the woman’s shoulder, and he tightens his grip as he kneels on the ground, breathing heavily, his lips forming a string of words Dean can’t hear.

In front of Cas, the woman he’s holding onto opens her eyes and starts crying, huge wailing bursts that carry over the crowd like a siren. “I’m healed!” she sobs, and the people around her gasp and turn towards her. “I’m healed!” She struggles to her feet, and Cas’s hand slips off her shoulder and he slumps back against his chair, shaking and still lost in whatever world he’s seeing, while the woman’s friends and strangers crowd around her, everyone touching and crying and shouting hallelujah! and praise God!

Dean’s frozen in disbelief. You don’t know what you just saw, he tries to tell himself, but he does, because it can’t be a coincidence. He’d almost be willing to accept that it was, that there’s no correlation whatsoever between Cas grabbing that woman’s shoulder and then seconds later a fucking miracle happening, except that Cas looks absolutely drained, collapsed on the floor like all the fight’s gone out of him.

Shouts come up from the other side of the room as well, and when Dean finally pulls his gaze away from Cas he sees that Brother Matthew is on his feet again, the man in front of him clapping his hands together in prayer, tears streaming down his face as he too yells, “I’m healed!” It’s like a fucking epidemic or something, because the same shout goes up from the back of the tent, and suddenly the whole place is awash with frenzied sound as people celebrate.

Dean turns away from the commotion. He feels like he’s suffocating, between the thick, humid air and the electric hum that’s settled over everything. Why does this fucking hunt feel so overwhelming? It’s not as if he’s in any kind of physical danger that he can tell—and even if he was he’s faced way scarier than this. Hell, he shot his first werewolf with Dad when he was seventeen, this is nothing. Just a bunch of harmless civilians hopped up on some sort of charismatic ghost vibes.
It's a bunch of civilians, and Cas. That’s the real problem, and fuck he knows it.

He forces himself to turn back around, survey the scene like he’s the objective professional he’s supposed to be. It’s impossible to tell how many people have been healed, but judging from the different clusters around the tent, it’s at least five, and soon to be one more, probably—Brother Matthew is praying over a kid in a middle row. Cas is... not now, he tells himself sternly, and looks toward the other side of the tent instead, letting the place where he knows Cas is still sprawled on the ground hang out in the corner of his vision like a blind spot. His gaze lands instead on the front row of chairs, and the old lady he’d been stuck next to earlier, still clutching her Bible, eyes closed, practically oblivious to everything going on around her. Weirdly oblivious, actually, given that nearly everyone else in that row is either crowded around the man who was healed earlier, or craning their heads to try to catch a glimpse of the kid Brother Matthew is currently praying over.

There’s a loud bang, and Dean’s hand is on the gun in his waistband before he can stop himself. His eyes jump automatically to Cas, who turns out to be the source of the noise: he’s knocked a folding chair over as he struggles to his feet. There’s a new energy in him, practically blazing out of his ice-blue eyes, and Dean is probably going to hell for thinking this right now, what with the ghost possession and all, but Cas is fucking gorgeous. He sways a little on his feet, then lurches toward the center aisle. He shoulders past the people in his way, and just barely makes it to a young woman on the other side of the aisle before his knees buckle again, sending him back to the ground on all fours.

Jesus Christ. Dean lets out a shaky breath, and tries not to panic as Cas once again slumps to the ground and people start to crowd around him until Dean’s completely lost sight of him.

“A little too crazy for you, too, huh?”

Dean turns. The speaker is a kid, maybe seventeen, who’s leaning up against a tent pole a couple of yards away from Dean.

“What?”

“I said, it’s pretty weird, right?” The kid’s dressed way too nicely for a teenager, in a polo and fucking khakis. He’s got a bad hair cut, long and tucked behind his ears, and there’s a wrinkle between his eyes like he’s permanently pissed off. He could be the goddamn ghost of tenth-grade Sammy, Dean thinks.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “It’s pretty weird, but if that’s what you think then what are you doing here? There’s gotta be better places than this to pick up chicks, even in Burkesville.”

The kid groans and rolls his eyes. “Can’t. My dad’s an elder, so I have to go to all the meetings. But I don’t have to like it,” he adds, crossing his arms defiantly. “What’s your excuse?”

Dean looks back at the tent, but he still can’t catch a glimpse of Cas. He tries to ignore the way his chest clenches. “Uh, my friend,” he says. He’s tired of the whole reporter angle, and he doesn’t know. Honestly, I’m kinda worried about him.”

“Don’t be. The whole thing’s stupid, but it’s not like anything bad ever happens to anyone. They just act like idiots for a couple of hours, and then everyone goes home.”

“What about the people who get healed?”

The kid sniffs. “I think they’re faking it. Some of the elders would totally pay people to pretend to be ‘healed’ if it meant more people would show up.”

“Yeah?” Dean moves a little closer to the kid so they can hear each other without raising their voices. “Which ones?”


“Which one...?”

“Brother Ed.” The kid points with his jaw, and Dean follows his direction but it’s pointless, there’s no way to pick anyone out of the crowd with that much commotion, even though it is beginning to die down a little.

Dean lets his gaze wander over the congregation again, considering. “You know everyone in the movement pretty well then, huh?”
“I mean, yeah. I can’t really escape it, not until I turn eighteen.”

God, stop being my little brother, Dean thinks. But it’s totally different—it’s not like he and Dad are a freaky cult. “Can I ask you a question about someone, then?”

The kid shrugs. “Sure.”

“Her.” Dean points at the old women in the front row, still rocking back and forth.

“You mean Miss Rachael!”

“I don’t know, I guess? I just asked you who she was.” Dean’s patience is fraying. “The old lady, front row.”

“Geez, calm down. And yeah, I know who she is, everyone does. That’s Rachael Branham.”

“Branham? Like, the prophet?”

The kid laughs. “Uh, no, a different Branham. Yeah, dude, the ‘prophet.’ She’s his daughter.”

“Wait, really?” Dean studies her carefully, trying not to get his hopes up too soon. “One other question?”

“What?”

“That Bible she’s got. Do you know anything about that?”

The kid gives him a weird look. “Okay, for someone who’s not interested in the movement you seem pretty interested.”

“Whatever, it’s not like I care. Yeah, the Bible’s real old, I’m pretty sure it belonged to her father.”

Bingo. “That’s got to be pretty valuable, right? Does she have some place to keep it safe when you’re not all, you know, doing this?” he gestures.

The kid is backing away from him. Shit, too far. “Look, you’re starting to make me nervous, okay? Besides, things are wrapping up, and I gotta get back in there so my dad doesn’t know I was skipping out.” He slips around Dean and back toward the crowd, which is picking itself up and settling back down in more-or-less orderly rows as Brother Matthew closes in a prayer.

Dean looks for Cas, and finds him still seated in the middle aisle, leaning up against a chair. His eyes are closed, and Dean can’t tell if he’s conscious or not. Follow Rachael Branham, he can hear his dad’s voice in his head, and it’s one-hundred-percent the logical, responsible thing to do, but his feet are leading him to Cas instead.

Up close, Cas looks even worse: the color is drained out of his face, and there’s a thin layer of sweat clinging to his forehead and neck. Dean drops to a knee next to him. “Hey, Cas?” he tries, shaking his shoulder gently, but there’s no response. “Jesus Christ. Cas?” He shakes him harder.

Aimee materializes next to him. “It’s all right, he’s fine, Dean.”

“Does this look fine to you?” Dean snaps. “He’s fucking catatonic!”

“Relax, he’s just tired. The meeting took a lot out of him.” She leans down and puts a hand on Cas’s cheek. “I’ll help him back to his hotel.”

“No.” Dean pushes her arm away. “I’ve got him.”

“I’m just trying to help.”

“Yeah, well I think you people have done enough already.”

Aimee laughs. “‘You people’? Dean, you did see what happened tonight, right? He belongs with us more than he does with you.”

People are starting to stare at them, but Dean doesn’t care. He straightens up and clenches his teeth. “Get the fuck away me and let me take care of my friend.”

Cas groans, and Dean drops back to the ground, missing whatever look Aimee gives him in response. He can hear her storming off, though, and that’s all he cares about. Cas is stirring a little, still disoriented, and Dean hooks an arm behind his shoulders. “Hey, buddy, let’s get you out of here. Can you stand up? Yeah, that’s it, man,” he mumbles as Cas clumsily makes it onto his feet.
People stare at them as they walk out of the tent, Cas leaning heavily against Dean’s side, and Dean glares daggers at all of them. It’s hard to see outside, a couple dozen pairs of headlights all hitting at eye-level, and Dean realizes he doesn’t have a clue where Cas is parked. It’s not like the guy’s currently in any state to drive, though. He steers them toward the Impala instead. Cas can rest up for a couple of minutes, and then depending on how he’s doing they can either find his car or Dean will drive him back to the motel.

The interior of the Impala is like a sauna, even this long after sunset, so Dean opens the driver’s side door as well and makes Cas sit sideways in the passenger seat, his legs and head outside of the car in case he pukes again. He risks popping the trunk in order to get an emergency water bottle. It’s warm and he gags when he takes a sip, but water is water, and Cas is probably dehydrated. He hands the bottle to Cas, who’s looking a little more like himself, and gets behind the wheel.

“I didn’t realize they let total novices perform miracles,” Dean says, finally breaking the silence.

Cas turns his head, an embarrassed blush spreading across his cheekbones, but his eyes are lit up. “You saw that?”

“Yeah. Cas, I gotta tell you, it was pretty trippy. How are you not freaked out about this?”

Cas must still be riding some kind of euphoric high, because for once he doesn’t take offense. “Dean, it was incredible.” He leans back in the seat and smiles, this huge giddy smile that’s all teeth and gums. “Being able to help people like that, I mean actually do something that makes a difference? And the power…” He trails off, biting his lip, then rolls his head to the side to look Dean in the eyes. “Don’t laugh.”

Dean swallows. “I’m not gonna,” he promises.

“I felt like a superhero,” Cas confides. “It felt like I was…more than myself? I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Look, Cas—” Dean stops, then tries again. To say he’s not good at this kind of thing would be a massive understatement, but Cas has knocked loose some part of him that has to at least try. “I know I’ve been pretty critical of all this…stuff, and I don’t mean to be. Okay? I’m not trying to making you feel bad, and I know we barely know each other, but, honest to God, I’m worried. I mean, what if you’re getting in over your head, and—”

Cas reaches over, pulls him down by the collar of his jacket, and kisses him.

Dean’s too caught off guard at first to do anything but blink, his hand coming up automatically to the front of Cas’s shirt. Cas leans in closer, and Dean’s brain and lips finally catch up to the situation at hand. He kisses back, hard, trying to erase all of the shit that he can’t explain and doesn’t know how to handle.

He’s only human, though, and he has to stop for a breath eventually. “Cas—”

“Shut up, Dean, please—”

Cas’s hands start to wander, the one reaching around to the back of Dean’s neck to pull him deeper into the kiss, the other inching under his jacket and traveling down his chest. Dean gasps a little when Cas’s fingers graze his left nipple, and Cas grins into the kiss and keeps going.

Fuck. Dean can feel himself getting hard, and Cas isn’t showing any signs of stopping, twining his fingers into Dean’s hair and licking more insistently into his mouth. Dean, meanwhile, is becoming more and more painfully aware of the fact that they’re sitting in a parked car right outside a prayer meeting, with the doors open, for fuck’s sake.

He pulls his head to the side and pushes back at Cas’s chest. “Cas, hold up a sec,” he pants, breathless.

“What is it?”

Dean tries to laugh. “Uh, we’re kind of out in public here?”

“So?” Cas growls, leaning back in.

It’s hot, yeah, but there’s also something that feels a lot more like fear rushing to Dean’s chest. “Seriously, Cas,” he says, and Cas backs off, watching him carefully as Dean tries to steady his breathing.

“Dean, I’m sorry—”

“It’s fine.” Dean doesn’t look at him. “I just… I made stupid mistakes like this when I was a kid,
and when people found out it wasn’t great, okay?”

Please don’t make me explain, Dean thinks, because he really was having a fucking fantastic time and he doesn’t want to kill the mood any more than he already has. Cas, thankfully, just nods like he knows exactly what Dean’s talking about, and maybe he does. “What do you want to do now?” he asks.

Dean takes a deep breath, tightens his grip on the steering wheel. “I want to take you back to my hotel room.”

“Mine’s closer.” Cas pulls his door shut. “Drive.”

* * *

They barely make it past the threshold before Cas spins them, pulling the door shut and crowding Dean up against it. He plants a hand on either side of Dean’s head and leans in to kiss him, and Dean opens for him like an invitation. He hooks two fingers in the waistband of Cas’s jeans and drags him closer until their hips are flush against each other. They stay like that for a while, heat building between them, until Cas gets impatient and starts to tug at Dean’s jacket. “Off.”

Dean shucks it off, remembering his gun only when it falls to the floor with a clatter. He winces, but Cas’s attention is entirely devoted to placing deep, hungry kisses along the line of his jaw and down his neck, so Dean kicks coat and pistol both into the corner, trying not to hear his dad’s voice chewing him out for improper weapon maintenance. Cas pulls at his shirt, as well, and within seconds it’s following the others into the corner.

Without warning, Cas slides to his knees, fumbling with the buttons on Dean’s fly. He pauses to look back up at Dean, who’s red-faced and trembling. “Should I slow down?”

“Fuck, no,” Dean breathes, and then Cas is swallowing him down and it’s all Dean can do to stay upright. He grabs for the door jam with one hand, bracing himself, biting his lip to keep from making any sound. Cas is incredible, and fuck, they’re not going to make it over to the bed at this rate.

A couple minutes later he’s panting and so close to coming he can barely think straight. He grabs at Cas’s shoulders and finally succeeds in getting him back up to eye-level. Cas’s pupils are blown wide and he looks vaguely disgruntled at the interruption. He leans forward to kiss Dean again, but Dean pushes back. “Bed,” he mumbles against Cas’s lips, and they stagger there in a few awkward tandem steps.

Cas falls back hard, bracing himself up with his elbows as Dean tries to remedy the fact that Cas is still somehow fully clothed. “Dean, I don’t have anything,” he cautions.

Shit. He does, but not on him, it’s back in his duffle at the other motel. He knew they should have gone to his room instead. “S’okay,” he says, getting Cas’s belt-buckle undone. “We can do something else instead.”

“Well I was trying to, until you interrupted me.”

Dean laughs out loud, and it doesn’t strike him until he’s done it how long it’s been since he’s laughed during sex. “Well, excuse me for living,” he retorts, finally getting Cas’s pants and boxers down past his hips. “Let me make it up to you?”

It’s been years—three, to be exact—since he’s given a blowjob. He knows his technique is rusty, and definitely nothing compared to Cas, but he’s enthusiastic, and judging from the way Cas responds, that’s at least two-thirds of the equation right there.

Cas makes a sort of warning noise and tugs at Dean’s hair—and that’s a poorly-calculated choice, since it only makes Dean even more determined to finish what he’s started. He keeps going, doing his best to swallow as Cas arches up against the hand Dean has splayed across his belly. It’s messy, and he ends up coughing and spitting more than he would have liked to, but Cas is boneless and flushed underneath him and Dean’s heart is pounding in a way that makes messy details irrelevant.

He’s still catching his breath when Cas sits up. He pushes at Dean until he’s lying flat on his back, fraying plastic stitching of the cheap motel bedspread poking into his shoulder blades. Cas slides down over him, takes him in hand, and starts mouthing kisses across Dean’s chest as he works his fist in a steady rhythm. Dean tries to stay quiet, determined not to embarrass himself, but when Cas goes for a nipple, letting his teeth graze gently across Dean’s skin, that’s it for him. “Oh, f-f-fuck, yeah…” he stutters, clenching the bedsheets in his fist. Cas is insatiable, dragging his lips across every inch of Dean’s chest, pulling sounds out of him that Dean didn’t realize he’d actually let himself make. He can feel himself right on the edge, and in a moment of rash decision-making he grabs at the collar of Cas’s shirt and pulls him up, kissing him hot and desperate, and that’s how he finally comes, gasping into Cas’s open mouth.
Dean’s slow to come back down. For a little while the only thing he registers is a tingling in his arms and legs, then Cas’s heavy and still mostly-clothed body sprawled next to him on the bed.

“Shit,” Dean breathes, because, yeah. That just happened.

“I assume you’re referring to the wreck we made of my clothes,” Cas says.

“Sorry,” Dean mumbles into his arm, but he’s only barely remorseful, and he can tell Cas isn’t actually bothered either.

“I’m going to go clean up,” Cas says, pushing up off the bed. “I think you somehow came out of that mostly unscathed.”

“’S’cause I’m awesome,” Dean slurs. He’s sleepy post-sex, and he knows that’s a cliche but he can’t help it.

Cas returns some time later with a warm washcloth, and Dean does a half-assed job of cleaning up, because despite Cas’s comment he’s definitely not spotless.

He’s fiddling with the buttons on his jeans, trying to get his sloppy fingers to work properly, when Cas says, “You can sleep here, you know.”

Even as tired as he is, there must be apprehension in the look he gives Cas, because the other man rushes to add, “We left my car at the meeting, remember? And I don’t really want to drive out for it now, so…”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dean looks around, considering the bare-bones motel room. “If you’re alright with losing the comforter, I’ll take the floor.”

“Oh my god.” Cas pulls the washcloth out of Dean’s hand and throws it in the direction of the bathroom. “In the bed, Dean. With me.”

“Fine,” Dean huffs. He kicks off his jeans, since the buttons weren’t working anyway. “But I don’t cuddle.”

“Neither do I.”

“Good.”

“Good.”
He wakes up to sunlight hitting his eyes and a solid, warm weight pressed up against his back. And for a moment, blinking in the morning glare, it’s so familiar that he doesn’t even question it. Cassie usually sleeps in late on the weekends, and it’s Dean who gets up first to make French toast and bacon and scrambled eggs with diced peppers in them, the tiny kitchen in Cassie’s fourth-floor walk-up all to himself until Cassie stumbles in wearing one of his shirts, following the smell of fresh coffee and sizzling fat.

Then his eyes adjust all the way, and it’s a crappy motel room with bad wallpaper and his jeans lying in the middle of the threadbare green rug.

Shit.

Behind him, Cas stirs, his breath hot against Dean’s neck, arm slung over his waist. Dean panics and rolls down onto his back, so that he can slide out from under Cas’s arm before the pounding in his chest is so loud it wakes him up. Cas is spread out on the bed under a tangle of sheets, his hair messed up beyond belief and a half-pout on his face as his still-sleeping brain tries to figure out what happened to the really comfortable pillow he’d just been spooning, and everything from last night comes pouring back into Dean’s head. Oh god, they slept together. He slept with Cas, and yeah that had always been the endgame, but in a quick, two-people-blowing-of-steam, harmless kind of way, because anything more than that, anything close to what he’s treading near here with Cas about to wake up and the smell of him still on Dean’s skin, is suicide, no matter how bad he wants it.

_Fuck_. He needs to get out of here before he screws things up even worse than he already has. Dean stumbles forward out of the bed, diving for his jeans. He gets them on and grabs two socks, praying they’re actually his, and finding his boots where they landed under the bed.

He’s just made it to his shirt when he hears Cas shift on the bed. “Dean? Is everything alright?”

Dean stiffens but doesn’t turn around. “Yeah, fine. Just getting my things.”

“You know you don’t have to leave immediately,” Cas offers. “Unless you have someplace to be, of course.”

“Well, I do.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I do. What, is that so fucking hard to believe?” Dean snaps, turning to face him.

Cas is propped up on one elbow in bed, the sheet pulled low enough around his hips that Dean
can tell he’s not wearing anything underneath, and for some reason, despite the fact that he sucked this guy off last night, sleeping next to him like that, Cas’s body curled around his, seems suddenly way too intimate, and Dean can feel his ears burning.

“Actually,” Cas is saying, “given that it’s eight-twenty on a Sunday morning and I know you’re not particularly religious: yeah, it is.”

“Jesus Christ, Cas. We fucked, and now you think you get to run my daily schedule or something?”

“Obviously not,” Cas bristles. “I just assumed you’d have the decency to not let me wake up to an empty bed, but clearly I was wrong.”

“Yeah, well, sorry about that.” Dean smiles grimly. “Never said I wasn’t a dick.”

Cas is silent for a moment while Dean struggles with his shirt, finally getting the thing turned right-side out and his head through the appropriate hole. Then: “Dean, is this about what happened last night, in the car?”

“What?”

“You were uncomfortable with being in public, with the thought of being seen. That’s what this is, you’re worried people will see us together?”

“We’re not together.”

“You know what I mean.” Cas swings his legs over the side of the bed and reaches for his boxers.

“People will know you’re gay.”

It shouldn’t scare him so much to hear it out loud. Dean came to terms with it on his own a long time ago. He knows he’s gay—well, bi, actually, but whatever—and he’s good with it, but other people are unpredictable, a fucking minefield of potential reactions, and a little self-preservation doesn’t make him a pansy.

“Whatever,” he manages to shrug. “That’s not what this is about.”

“But last night—”

“Jeez, Cas, what can I say, I just don’t get my rocks off putting on a show for other people.”

“You said—”

“Fuck whatever I said!” Dean barks. “Okay? What do you want here, Cas, a fucking thank-you note?” Cas looks crushed, the color draining from his face, but Dean barrels on because if he stops now he’ll walk right back over to that bed and kiss Cas until the light’s back in his eyes, and he can’t let that happen. ‘Fine: ‘You were a great lay, thanks for the sex.’ I don’t know what else you’re looking for, but too bad, because that’s all there is, got it?”

“Understood.” Cas’s voice is clipped, his blue eyes hard.

“Fantastic. So can I go now?”

“I wish you would.”

“Good, ‘cause I am.” Dean scoops his jacket off the floor, bundling his pistol up under the folds. He stomps out the door to the parking lot without a backward glance, letting the hollow wooden door fall shut behind him with a frustratingly anti-climactic thump.

He’s two minutes away before he remembers that Cas is still without his car. ‘Fuck him,’ he thinks petulantly. He can call a cab or he can fucking walk, see if I care.

Back at his own motel he turns on the shower too hot, trying to keep his anger riding high, knowing the wave of disappointment that’s going to follow once it dies. He’s only marginally successful, so that when he emerges from the bathroom a half-hour later he’s an ugly mix of emotions: pissed at Dad for taking that follow-up job in Ohio in the first place, pissed at Branham’s ghost for fucking with people’s lives, pissed at himself for wanting things he knows he can’t have, pissed at Cas for kissing him and for being so awkwardly funny and achingly sincere and just generally for existing at all.

Dean swallows everything down and holds onto the one piece of the puzzle that he can maybe do anything about: Branham. He’s pretty sure the bastard is tethered to that old Bible, and whether his daughter is controlling his spirit or blissfully unaware of the whole thing, she’s the person he needs to track down. Find her, find the Bible, salt and burn, and then he can quit this whole fucking town with its weirdos and its sociology students and just get back to the way everything was before.
He stops in at the diner, because he needs coffee and a massive stack of pancakes, badly, and also because he’s pretty sure Jackie is enough of a gossip to know the information he needs. It’s not too busy—in a town like this, most folks are probably at church this time of the day, and Jackie waves him over to the counter. “Still can’t get rid of you, huh?” she asks teasingly, bringing over a mug and a pot of coffee without prompting.

“Yeah, well, people keep talking to me about the pancakes you got here and I still haven’t gotten to try them,” Dean says, with a grin he doesn’t feel.

“Oh, it looks to me like something—or I guess I should say someone—else is keeping you around.”

Dean’s stomach drops. “W-what?”

Jackie giggles and gestures to his neck with the coffee pot. “Well, judging from those love bites on your neck you had a pretty fine night with a very lucky lady.”

Dean claps a hand to his neck before he can stop himself. Fuck him for not bothering to look in the mirror before he left. At least he’s blushing hard enough now to probably mask the hickeys Cas left.

Jackie swats him with her order book. “Don’t go looking so scandalized, I’m not judging you. Or her,” she adds with a wink. “So, those pancakes?”

Dean manages to order a short stack with hash browns and bacon on the side, and thankfully orders come up that take Jackie away to other tables long enough for him to compose himself.

Ten minutes later she’s back with his breakfast. “Hey, Jackie,” he starts, as she freshens up his cup of coffee, “can I ask you a question about those tent meeting folks?”

“I guess,” she shrugs. “What do you want to know about?”

“So, a lot of folks come in from out of town on the weekends, right? But what about the folks running the thing? I mean, they’ve got a lot of little kids, and older people, plus they seem like they’ve set up shop pretty solidly around here. They’re not commuting in from somewhere a couple towns over, are they?”

Jackie gives him a funny look. “Now what do you want to know something as boring as that for?”

“More balanced angle,” Dean lies. “I want to make sure the article focuses on how this all affects your town—you know, if new folks have moved in, if they’re good neighbors, that kind of thing.”

It softens her up, just as Dean had hoped it would. “Well it’s about time someone gave a toss about any of the regular folk around here,” she says. “Yes, some of those folks are renting out places in an apartment complex just down the street, and I can tell you, people have some very mixed feelings about that around here.” She lowers her voice conspiratorially. “From what I hear they’re decent tenants, always pay rent on time and never too noisy. But you know, too quiet ain’t always a good thing either.” Jackie raises her eyebrows. “’Cause no one knows what they’re getting up to in their spare time.”

“And plus,” she adds, straightening up and flicking a dishrag half-heartedly along the countertop, “there were some families in the trailer park over on the west side of town that were hoping to move into those new places when they finished up, and those revivalist folks swept right in and scooped up a bunch of spots. So there’s some folks bent-up over that, for sure.”

Dean pulls out a notebook and flips it to a clean page. “Thanks, Jackie, that’s a big help. Can you give me the address of those apartments?”

“Walnut Street—that’s about three streets south of here, right off Main. Take a left when you get there, you can’t miss it. And the tent folks’ places are in the furthest little cluster in,” she adds, unprompted.

“Great.” Dean makes a note and flashes her a smile, more genuine this time around. “Thanks so much.”

“Of course,” Jackie beams. “Just make sure to put in your story where you got all your best information from.”

“I’ll print your name and everything,” Dean promises, and digs into his pancakes.

He finishes just as the after-church brunch crowd is showing up. Dean leaves cash on the table rather than waiting for Jackie or one of the other waitresses who just started their shifts to have a moment free. He follows Jackie’s directions to Greenmanor Apartments, which seems like an
overly-optimistic name for the collection of two-story row houses with beige plastic siding and a sad-looking central playground. The road back to the last set of apartments has speed bumps every couple of yards, and he eases the Impala over them gingerly.

Dean lets the car idle in the parking lot attached to the apartments, figuring he’ll look less immediately suspicious as a stopped car than he would if he got out and started poking around. The apartments are quiet, and he doesn’t recognize any of the cars lined up outside them, but that’s not really saying anything—it’s not like he was memorizing every license plate he saw at the meetings, there was more pressing shit going on at the time.

He waits a while longer, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel and wishing he’d taken a piss before he left the diner. There’s no motion from the apartments, so as far as he can guess no one’s called him in as a suspicious person yet, but he’s not any closer to confirming that Rachael Branham lives here, either. He closes his eyes and tips his head back against the seat-back, and tries not to think about what Cas is doing right now. Or worse, what Cas thinks about him. White-hot rage seems like the best outcome he has going. Dean’s not sure he can handle disappointment. On the bright side or whatever, though, he’ll never actually know, since he’s never going to see the guy again. So there’s that at least.

Of course that means his brain just picks the worst-case scenario and rolls with it.

Twenty minutes pass without any sign of movement. Dean’s about ready to start knocking on some doors, when finally a white Civic pulls up and parks at an angle in one of the resident spots. The driver gets out, and finally, Dean’s luck seems to be actually looking up for once because it’s Rachael Branham, prophet’s daughter in the flesh. She’s got an oversized, bright green purse slung over her shoulder, and Dean’s willing to bet solid money her Bible’s in there. He doesn’t have a game plan worked out yet, but he can improvise, turn on the all-American-boy charm.

“Ma’am? Ma’am?” He gets out of the Impala and walks towards her. Rachael turns and gives him a wary look, so he quickly flashes her a reassuring smile. “Don’t mean to bother you, I just was noticing when you were driving in that your back tires looked a little low. You checked the pressure on them lately?”

Rachael crosses her arms. “Now do I look like my knees are up to that sort of task?”

“I’ll check ‘em for you, if you’d like,” Dean offers. “Wouldn’t want you to get stranded somewhere with a flat.”

“Well aren’t you sweet,” she says. “Do you make a habit of loitering outside old lady’s homes to provide handyman assistance?”

Dean grins. He likes her, she’s got attitude. Of course, she may also be manipulating her dead father’s spirit to possess people and perform fake miracles, but that’s a different story. “I’ve been waiting for a friend,” he offers by way of explanation. “But he’s running late, so I’ve got the time. I’ll grab a pressure gauge from my car.”

He checks the air on all four tires for good measure—the back left tire actually is a couple pounds low, as it turns out. Rachael questions him while he works, just the usual “tell me about yourself” conversation. Dean decides to ditch the reporter story, figuring it’ll only play badly for him, and just tells her instead that he’s in town for the revival meetings. “Come to think of it, ma’am, you do look kind of familiar. Have I seen you there?”

“Yes, I suppose you would have,” she answers. “I’m Rachael Branham.”

Dean acts appropriately surprised. “It’s an honor,” he says, offering her his hand. “I’m Mike Smith.” Shit, he’s using too many different names on this case. Not that anyone’s going to prepare notes, and if everything goes his way he’ll be out of here by tomorrow anyway. All he needs now is a little more intel on where Rachael keeps the Bible, and a window of opportunity. Please be the kind of old lady who likes to feed people.

“Come on inside and I’ll fix you a glass of iced tea,” Rachael tells him, reading his mind.

“Thanks, that’s awfully kind.” Dean pockets the gauge and follows her into the apartment. It’s snug and pretty basic construction, but Dean’s a little surprised how lived-in it looks. They might be meeting in tents, but it doesn’t look like the movement’s in a hurry to leave anytime soon. The front room is set up as a dinning room, a well-used kitchen area lining the far right wall. There are a couple of heavy pieces of furniture in the room—a sturdy-looking wooden table under the front window, a china cabinet on the opposite wall—and they look old, too, like the sort of furniture that would be in a family for generations.

Rachael stops by the china cabinet and reaches into her bag. She pulls out the Bible, places it gently on the bottom shelf of the cabinet, and closes and locks the door, depositing the tiny old-fashioned key in her purse. “I’ve got some blueberry muffins left over from breakfast too, if you’d like one,” she offers.
“Just tea is fine, thanks ma’am.” Dean studies the Bible in the china cabinet as Rachael takes a pair of glasses down from the kitchen cupboard. “That’s an unusual place to keep a Bible.”

“Well, it’s an unusual Bible.”

“How so?”

“For a start, it belonged to my father,” Rachael answers. “That’s the Bible he had with him through his whole ministry, even before the first healing he performed. He had it with him in the car the night of the accident, and it sat by his bedside table in the hospital right up until he died.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Oh, no,” she cuts him off, bringing the glasses of tea over to the table. She hands him one and picks a crocheted coaster out of a basket on the table, puts it in front of him and gestures for him to sit down. Dean sits. “That was decades ago, before you were even born,” Rachael continues. “And besides, he’s with the Lord in paradise.” She sips at her tea and leans back in her chair, moving stiffly as her joints settle. “So yes, I think you’d say it’s a pretty special Bible. And I fought long and hard to keep it, so you can believe I’m not just going to put it on any old shelf.”

The tea is extremely sweet. Dean tries not to grimace. “Someone else in your family wanted it instead?”

“Well, in a way, yes, but not for themselves.” Rachael’s eyes narrow, and Dean gets the sense that decades don’t really matter when it comes to whatever feud she and her family had. “My siblings all wanted to have it buried alongside our father. Mostly it was Joseph’s idea, but he was the oldest and the rest of them just followed his lead. He even bullied our mother into taking his side. She agreed with me initially, but once Joseph decides he’s going to make you change your mind, there’s no stopping him.”

“You did, though.”

Rachael smiles a proud smile. “Yes, I did. I told him it wasn’t right to bury the holy word of God in the ground, that the scriptures are still living and need to be treated with respect. I had some of the elders on my side, too, the ones who didn’t even want my father to be buried in the first place. He’ll come back, resurrected and made whole again, they told Joseph, but they didn’t know that there was any provision in scripture for a book. Bodies, yes, but possessions?” She slaps an arthritic hand down on the table. “And that shut Joseph right on up. My mother kept the Bible until she passed away, and then after that I took it. I think nearly everyone but me had forgot about it by that point. Joseph was busy leading the ministry, and most of the others had families and problems of their own to worry about. So I’ve kept it in that china cabinet ever since, taken it with me every time I’ve moved. I suppose I don’t have to keep it under lock and key these days, but old habits die hard. Besides,” she says wryly, “that’s my privilege now that I’m old. People expect you to be a little funny in the head.”

“You’ve moved around a lot, then!” Dean asks, mostly for something to keep the conversation going. His glass of iced tea is still more than half full, and there’s no way he’s going to chug it, but she’s already told him more than everything he needs to know about the Bible. He obviously can’t get at it now. His best shot is probably to break in later tonight, when she’s sleeping—not exactly his classiest move, but it’ll be easy, in and out, burn the Bible in an open lot somewhere and get out of town. He’ll take the EMF reader tonight to check for one-hundred-percent certain—he doesn’t have it on him right now, but after that story she just told him? That’s more than enough weird shit to make a restless spirit latch onto the book, and there’s nothing else as old and connected to Branham that’s been there at each of those meetings.

“Here and there,” Rachael says, answering his question. “My husband was in sales, so we lived all over the country. When he died, I settled back in Jeffersonville for a while, where I grew up.”

“And then you moved down here?”

“Going on five months ago now, yes.” Rachael sighs. “I’m getting too old for so much moving around, but Matthew asked me to come as a special favor, and he’s family. He’s my nephew by marriage, married to my sister Rebekah’s oldest daughter. He thinks there’s something powerful happening here, maybe the final seals themselves, and the second coming.”

“And what do you think?” Dean asks.

Rachael gives him a sly look. “Oh, I know better than to show my hand this early in the game. Could be the time, could not. I will tell you this, though.” She points a finger at Dean. “If it’s happening in my lifetime, it better happen right here, because I’m not looking to move ever again.”
Forty minutes, two muffins, and a whole mess of hastily-constructed lies about himself and his interest in the movement later, and Dean is finally pulling away from Rachael Branham’s apartment. He figures he has about nine hours to kill at this point, and despite what he told Rachael, there’s no way he’s spending any of that time at the prayer service tonight. The chances of running into Cas are way too high, and besides, he can’t really risk the possibility of getting ghost-whammied himself. Dean’s still not sure how Branham’s spirit (or Rachael, if she really is controlling it—jury’s still out on that one) picks and chooses people to possess. He and Cas were sitting right next to each other that first night, and outside of a weird sort of hum in the air around him, Dean was totally fine. He’s guessing it has something to do with gullibility, like how you have to actually think hypnosis is going to work for it to actually take, even though he’s never heard of a spirit being limited that way. There’s a lot about this case that’s weird, though, and Dean’s fed up enough with the whole thing that he’s more than willing to just fix the problem and not think twice about it.

He does kind of wish he and Cas could have parted on better terms, though. His stomach sinks as he remembers the last look Cas gave him, hurt and bewildered and more than a little disgusted. There’s no use thinking about it, though, because he can’t go back and fix anything now. Just another fuck-up to add to his list and keep imagining that maybe next time he’ll learn from his mistakes. God, is this what getting older is? He used to be so good at one-night-stands, now he can’t even be around a guy three days without getting soft and attached and wanting more.

The gas light comes on, and for lack of anything better to do, Dean tracks down a gas station. It’s hot in the afternoon sun and just getting muggier, as clouds start to roll in, suggesting rain but holding off on making good that promise.

There’s a single air-conditioning unit in the convenience store, going full-blast in the window by the counter. Dean stares at the cigarette case while the attendant runs his credit card, fingers itching. It’s been years since he’s smoked, not since Sam bullied him into kicking the habit by bringing home handful after handful of anti-smoking pamphlets from the school nurse and plastering them all over the apartment, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t still get cravings sometimes. Especially in a moment like this, when he’s bored and frustrated and hasn’t had a drink in four days.

“Hey,” he asks the attendant, on a whim, “how far would I have to drive to find a bar around here?”

“Eh, ’bout thirty miles or so,” the man answers, handing Dean back his card. “You gotta head down to Tennessee, though. There’s a couple places first town over the border. Sign here,” he adds, pushing receipt and pen across the counter.

Dean signs and thanks the guy. Tennessee it is, then. If he’s got to kill time and be mopey about Cas, he’s going to do it with a beer in hand, or three.

He rolls down the windows in the Impala and blasts AC/DC all the way to the state line. True to the attendant’s word, there’s a bar just off the road right as he’s pulling into the first town. It’s pretty empty, and a total dive, but it’s open for business which is all Dean’s interested in right now.

He’s working on his second beer when his phone rings. Dean panics, half-expecting the call to be from Cas, but when the caller ID reads Dad, his stomach sinks in disappointment he didn’t realize he’d feel.

“Hello?”

“Dean? How’s the case going?”

“Fine. Good,” Dean amends. He checks his surroundings, but the bartender is busy in a back room and the only other customers are a good distance away. He lowers his voice anyway. “Found the object the spirit’s tethered to. It’s an old Bible that the guy used to own, his daughter has it now. Just waiting until tonight to take care of it.”

“And you’re sure that’s the source?”

“Positive. She said it was in the room when he died, and her brother even wanted to bury it with the guy. If Branham’s ghost was going to latch on to something, for sure that’s it.”

“EMF readings check out?”

“Yeah,” Dean lies, because they will. “Pretty much a done deal.”

“Good. Stick around for a while tomorrow to make sure it takes.”

“You don’t want me to come up to Ohio right away?” Now that he’s faced with the choice between a small city where he almost certainly won’t run into his ex-girlfriend and a tiny town where he definitely will run into his disastrous one-night stand, the thought of driving up to Ohio
doesn’t seem so bad in comparison.

“Finished up in Athens. I’m heading over to Jericho, got a lead on something down there.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Text me when it all checks out and I’ll let you know what the game plan is next,” John says. “You did a good job with this one, son.”

Dean can feel his cheeks burn at the unexpected praise. “Thank you,” he mutters, trying to make it not sound like a question, because really? Dad hardly ever applauds him for a job well done on hunts he sends Dean on, let alone a flimsy excuse like this case has been.

“Be careful getting in to burn that thing. Don’t do anything stupid and get caught.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Alright, Dean, I’ll talk with you soon.”

“Bye,” Dean says into the click. He stares at his phone for a minute before he snaps it shut. So it’s weird that Dad’s not more pissed at him, but whatever. Maybe he had a lucky game of pool, or maybe he struck gold with a new lead in The Hunt. Hell, maybe he got laid, Dean doesn’t fucking care. He finishes his beer and orders a third, plus a shot of Jack Daniels. He wishes this place had a kitchen. He should probably head somewhere else before he drives back to Kentucky, get some food to soak up the alcohol, but it’s a while yet until he needs to be anywhere, and goddammit, he’s earned the right to kick back a little.

* * *

So he kicks back a little too much. He’s fumbling with his keys by the time he leaves the bar, and Dean makes a lot of stupid-ass decisions in his life (hello, this whole Kentucky-slash-miracles-slash-Cas clusterfuck, exhibition number one) but he’s not about to run the risk of messing up Baby. The bartender told him he could find a Waffle House about a quarter-mile down the road, so he walks there, orders two waffles, a mess of loaded hashbrowns, and plenty of coffee. The girl who brings him his food gives him a sort of sideways look, and okay, it’s a little early to be doing the whole drunk-fast-food run thing, but he’s not drunk, really, just buzzed. The caffeine and food help, though, and by the time he’s paying for his meal, Dean’s head is clear and he feels like a man on a mission. Time to gank this son of a bitch Branham already.

Outside it’s getting dark, just enough light left in the sky to see the thunderclouds building up in the west. The air is oppressive, thick and hot, summer hanging on with the very last of its strength, kicking and screaming against the storm that’s going to cut its strings and let autumn finally take over. Dean treks back to the Impala, the bar lit up and the parking lot just about full now that it’s nearing nine o’clock. He pulls away from the bar and heads back up to Kentucky.

He drives past the meeting site on his way, and the grounds are clearing out—not quite deserted yet, but the meeting must have adjourned a while ago, which means Rachael Branham is probably home by now, and hopefully a predictable enough old lady to be nearly fast asleep already. Dean wonders how many people Cas healed tonight, and his stomach twists weirdly. He wonders how they’re all going to take it, Cas, and Aimee and Brother Matthew, all the people holding out for a miracle, when all of a sudden the juice runs out. Are they going to call it a fluke dry spell, keep waiting for things to turn around again? Maybe decide that they’ve pissed off God somehow and find some way to make it right? Maybe someone puts two and two together with the missing Bible—not the whole ghost possession, but figures some other way that the two might be connected. He wonders about Cas in particular, blindsided by this whole thing and yet so certain that he’s following the right leads, has shit figured out. What’s it going to do to him when he realizes the whole thing is a sham after all, and he got sucked right up into it?

Whatever, Dean tells himself. Not your problem. You’re doing the guy a favor, even if he doesn’t know it. Even if he never gets a chance to tell him—

Stop. Dean bangs a fist on the steering wheel. He did that shit with Cassie, let himself believe that if he just told the truth for once it would somehow magically fix everything. There’s a reason why shut up and lie is rule number one, and he’s not making that mistake ever again.

Fuck this whole night. Dean turns up the stereo, blasting heavy metal out into the night air.

He has to turn it down again a couple blocks later, of course, as he gets closer to the apartment complex. Not exactly stealthy to announce your arrival with Highway to Hell blaring. He goes past Walnut street, turning into the next road and driving until he reaches a semi-abandoned building site on an open lot. He scoped this out after he left Rachael’s place this afternoon, figuring he’d be better off parking someplace nearby and walking over. It means his getaway car is that much further away, but he doesn’t have to worry about someone seeing a strange car outside the apartments for the second time in one day and getting nosy. Dean kills the engine, stashes the EMF reader and his gun in his jacket, and starts his walk.
He wishes he had a flashlight. There’s a mostly-full moon tonight, he’s pretty sure, but it’s completely covered by clouds, and the woods between the lot and the apartments are a little thicker than he realized. Dean pulls out his phone and uses the faint light to trace his path, keeping shy of the worst of the roots and low-hanging branches.

There’s a faint glow from the front room of one of the apartments on the block, but the lights in Rachael’s apartment are all off, and that’s good enough for him. Dean ducks down and moves quickly to the front door. He tries the doorknob quietly, hoping small-town faith in humanity hasn’t died out completely, but the door is locked. For a woman who keeps a Bible locked in a cabinet, though, he probably shouldn’t be too surprised. Pulling his lock pick set from his back pocket, Dean gets to work. He wishes, absentmindedly, like he always does when he has to do this, that Sam were here with him. The kid has a lot more patience for this kind of work (and to be totally honest, better hearing—Dean’s kind of blown out some of the high frequencies with years of his music), and it’s always nicer to have someone watching your back.

The tumblers catch eventually, and Dean eases the door open, holding his breath until it’s clear that it’s not going to squeak. He slips inside, glancing around the front room. There’s a little light to see by from a streetlamp outside, and his eyes land on Rachael’s purse on one of the kitchen chairs. Dean rummages around in it, a little baffled by the number of different pockets the thing seems to have, but eventually his fingers brush a cold metal object. The key. He pulls it out and heads over to the china cabinet.

The doors are noisy as he opens them, creaking on old hinges, panes of glass rattling in their loose confines. Branham’s Bible is just sitting there, a bulky lump at the bottom of the cabinet in the dim light, and Dean picks it up, stuffing the thing under his arm while he closes the doors. There’s no real need, he supposes, but it might take her a fraction of a minute longer to realize the thing’s missing if the cabinet is locked up.

“Dean?”

He drops the key and nearly drops the Bible as well, spinning so fast that he pulls a muscle in his neck as he whips around. Cas is standing in the open doorway, his silhouette backlit by the streetlamp. “What the hell are you doing here?” he says in a loud whisper.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Dean shoots back. What the fuck. Seriously, what the fuck and how does something like this even happen to him?

“We were next door, waiting for Brother Matthew, and Aimee thought she saw someone go in this apartment,” Cas hisses, and Dean sees Aimee step out of the shadows, crowded up against Cas’s back like she’s using him as a shield. Perfect, the only thing that could have made this situation worse.

“Did you break in?” Cas is asking. “What are you—oh my god, Dean, are you stealing from Rachael Branham?”

Cas’s voice is rising, edging dangerously close to exiting whispering territory, and Dean shoots a nervous glance over his shoulder to the rest of the apartment. “Shit, Cas, just calm down, okay? This isn’t what it looks like.”

“You’re not seeing the whole picture here—”

“I can’t believe I trusted you! I introduced you to these people, Dean, I feel responsible, and now—”

Dean moves towards him, trying to edge him out of the apartment, further away from its sleeping occupant. “Cas, I promise—”

“You used me, you fucking asshole,” Cas spits. “Aimee, call the police.”

“Wait, please!” Dean holds his hands up, Branham’s Bible still clasped in his left. “Cas, I can explain, okay? Let me explain, come on.”

“What.” Cas bites out the word, arms crossed. “What the hell kind of an explanation could you possibly have for this? What, you have some kind of press credentials that put you above the law and basic human decency?”

“Cas, it’s…god, keep an open mind here, okay? Please?” Dean takes a deep breath, his heart in his throat but he can’t think of a lie fast enough and he’s not taking Cas out to make a getaway. “Branham’s possessing people. I mean…his ghost is.” Cas doesn’t call bullshit immediately, so Dean plunges on. “It’s not miracles, or God or whatever, I’m sorry. It’s a restless spirit, and it’s tethered to this Bible and I have to destroy it, okay?”
There’s a moment of tense, awkward silence as Dean waits for Cas to respond. Then: “Oh my god.” A laugh, but it’s not Cas, it’s Aimee. “Oh my god, you complete fucking moron.”

She blinks, and her eyes shutter black.

_Fuck_. Dean surges forward, tries to grab Cas’s arm to pull him back towards him, but Aimee is quicker. She pushes between the two of them, leaning against the open door and grinning lazily at Dean. “I know hunters are pretty useless,” she laughs again, “but really? Miracles by ghost-possession? And here I thought you were supposed to be one of the best, Dean Winchester.”

Dean tries to swallow down his panic. She—it—knows his name, and that can’t be a good sign, but what’s worse is he has no clue what to do. Holy water, salt, that’s all he knows but it’s not going to do a lick of good because he doesn’t have either on him, because it’s not like he goes into every job expecting to run into a fucking _demon_. Dad hasn’t even dealt with one of these, not that he knows of at least, even if his journal is full of random scribblings. Dean’s completely, one-hundred-percent screwed.

“Cas, run,” he grits out, gripping the Bible tighter in his hand and holding it out in front of him like it’s some kind of shield. Cas just stands rooted in his spot, gaze darting franticly from Dean to Aimee and back again, his eyes full of confusion turning to fear.

“Oh sweetie, that’s not going to help,” the Aimee-demon gestures at the Bible. “Neither is burning it, or whatever it is you boys do, but by all means, be my guest. Go have your little bonfire, what’s going on here is well above your pay grade.” She points a finger at Cas, who stiffens suddenly, his eyes wide. “Not him, though,” she says coldly. “Him, I keep.”

“Cas?”

“I—” Cas’s voice comes out choked. “I can’t move. Aimee? What’s happening?”

“Aww.” Aimee smiles the way you would at a puppy that’s tripped over itself. “He’s so clueless. Even more than you, and I didn’t think that was possible.” She blinks again, and her eyes turn back to normal, human eyes. “Get out, Dean,” she demands. “It’s what you were planning to do anyway. Cas’ll be safe, here with me.” She curls her fingers together, making a fist, and Cas’s face twists up in pain.

“Let him go, you bitch!” Dean has his gun out and pointed at the demon before he’s totally thought it through, his hand shaking from anger as much from fear.

“That’s not going to work,” she says, shaking her head sadly. “Dean, I thought your daddy taught you better than that.” She narrows her eyes, black again, and smirks at him. “Tell him to hurry up, by the way. We’re getting anxious to meet him.”

“Yeah, it won’t kill you,” Dean agrees, trying to push all the questions to the back of his mind. The demon knows way too much about him, his family, and there’s definitely something seriously wrong about that, but he can panic about it later. Right now, his priority is Cas. “But that doesn’t mean the same for the person you’re possessing.”

“You’re not going to kill an innocent girl.”

“No, I’m not,” Dean agrees, his hand steadying as half a plan forms in his mind. “But I’ll shoot her in the leg, and that’s gonna wake up Rachael Branham, and I don’t think you’re going to be willing to blow your cover. You’re wearing a fucking _teenager_, people are going to worry about the fact that she’s a little shot up.”

He’s bluffing, mostly—Dean’s pretty sure he couldn’t bring himself to shoot Aimee, even just in the leg, and even if she did annoy the hell out of him. Or he thought she did. Has she been the demon this whole time? He’s just praying it’ll work.

But the only thing he’s succeeded in doing is pissing her off. “I gave you an out,” she hisses, moving toward him. “I wasn’t going to kill you, but now you’re asking for it, you little pest.”

_“Pater noster, qui es in caelis,” _Cas blurts out. _“In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti.”_ The demon shudders and her shoulders hunch inward, as if she’s flinching from attack. Cas stumbles backwards and looks at Dean wide-eyed.

_“Keep going!”_ Dean yells. He lunges for the table, grabs the salt-shaker and fumbles with the shaker top. Cas is continuing to repeat his Latin, the words spilling into each other, his voice shaking. _“Come on, come on…”_ Dean mutters to himself.

He finally unscrews the top and spins back around to see Aimee slowly straightening, a mocking look on her face. “Nice try, boys, but—”

Dean throws the salt in her eyes. She screeches and claps a hand to her face. “_GO!”_ Dean bellows, pushing past her and grabbing Cas by the arm. They sprint across the parking lot and
crash through the woods, hearts pounding. Dean doesn’t let them slow down until they reach the Impala, and even then they barely stop for a breath. “Get in, get in,” he yells.

“Dean, what——”

“Cas, get in the fucking car!” He does, and Dean floors it, tires squealing in the loose gravel as he spins the car around and heads for the main road.

“What the hell happened back there?” Cas demands. Now that the danger’s not right in front of them, he sounds pissed off instead of frightened.

“It was a demon.” Saying it out loud, the enormity of the whole thing suddenly strikes Dean, the sheer dumb luck that got them out of there alive. He starts to shake. “Fuck. Fuck.”

“A demon?” Cas’ voice is rising. “Dean, how do you——”

“Not now, Cas, okay?” Dean grips the steering wheel tighter and tries to control his rapid breathing. They’re safe for right now, probably, although he has no idea how demons track you, if they’re confined to their host bodies or if they can teleport or some shit. They need to get somewhere safe so that he can set up salt lines, and call Dad. “We gotta get back to the hotel, I’ll explain there, I promise.” He speeds up to run a red light.

Cas is silent, and for a moment it’s just the two of them, breathing heavily, the sound of approaching thunder rippling overhead. Finally Cas just says, almost monotone, “You’re not a reporter, are you?”

“No,” Dean agrees, and that’s all they say until they reach the motel.

Dean parks the car and moves wordlessly to the trunk, Cas following him. He can’t think of anything to say that will adequately prepare Cas for this (so this looks bad, but I promise I’m not a serial killer), so he just opens it without preamble. Shotgun, extra casings, silver knife, rock salt. He hands the last one to Cas to carry, not making eye contact. He feels like he needs something more, something stronger, but there’s nothing else in the Impala’s arsenal that’s going to help against demons, so he slams the trunk shut. “Inside.”

There’s another thunderclap, louder than before, and they just barely make it through the door into Dean’s motel room before the first fat drops start to fall. Dean dumps his armful of weapons on the bed and takes the canister of salt from Cas, pours thick, even lines in front of the door and along the windowsill. He gets the last grains in place and finally, almost, feels like he can breathe again. “Okay, we’re good.”

Cas gives a shaky laugh. “We’re good?” He drops heavily onto the bed, staring at Dean incredulously. “In what possible way is this good?”

“Well, we’re not dead yet.”

“Oh, right. Because dying was definitely something I thought I was going to have to actively avoid tonight.” Cas gestures around the room. “And how exactly is putting salt around the entrances supposed to help us?”

“It repelled her earlier, didn’t it?”

“Because you threw it in her eyes, Dean, what did you expect?” Cas gets up again and starts pacing the room, frantic. “I don’t understand what’s going on here.”

He shouldn’t be getting pissed, a rude awakening to the supernatural is definitely a lot to take in, but it’s not like Dean’s completely chill about everything that just got dumped on their plates either. “Well that explains how you did a fucking exorcism back there,” he snaps, dripping sarcasm. “I went to Catholic school!” Cas yells. “I panicked, and, I’m sorry, are you actually upset with me for doing something that worked?”

“No, you probably saved my life,” Dean admits.

“I didn’t actually cast out a demon, did I?” Cas looks staggered.

“You just dinged it,” Dean assures him. “Sorry, still only one kind of miracle in your wheelhouse, I guess.”

“God.” Cas buries his face in his hands. “I don’t know what’s happening anymore. I’m just a fucking grad student, this isn’t what I signed up for.”

Dean signs. “Want me to explain it to you?”
Cas gives him a startled look. “You knew that was going to happen? That Aimee…”

“Did I know she was a demon? Fuck, no. No fucking idea. I’ve never run into one before.” He remembers as he says it that he honestly has no idea if the salt lines will actually hold—for a ghost they’d be golden, but who knows if a demon can just step over the lines, since they’re in a corporeal host. “Shit, I need to call my dad,” he says, digging his phone out of his pocket.

“I’m sorry, what? Now?”

“I’ll explain in a minute.” He punches the speed-dial and listens to it ring, feeling Cas’s completely baffled stare as he awkwardly waits.

He gets voicemail. If this is an emergency, call my son, Dean. He’ll know what to do.

“Fuck, Dad, no I don’t know what to fucking do, Dean thinks, but then there’s the beep. “Hey, dad. Uh, ran into some trouble with the Branham job and I could use your help?” He tries to keep his voice calm, to not let either Cas or his dad in on how completely out of his depth he is. “Yeah, call me when you get this.” He snaps the phone shut and drops it angrily onto the bed.

“Dean, are we not actually safe here?” So Cas caught on to his panic after all, great.

“Honestly?” Dean doesn’t have it in him to lie anymore, even though the fear that’s starting to creep into Cas’s eyes makes his throat clench up. It’s your fault he’s caught up in this. Your fault if something goes wrong and you can’t save him. “I think the salt lines will hold.”

“You think?”

“I told you, I’ve never hunted a demon before, okay? But they work for ghosts, so…” He spreads out his hands. “Hopefully? I’m sorry, that’s all I’ve got.”

Cas is just staring. “Ghosts?”

“Right.”

“You were serious, then. That bullshit you were telling me before…things got weird, about burning some ghost out of Rachael Branham’s Bible? You actually believe that?”

“Okay, I can explain.” Because there’s really no way of backing out of this now, not when they’re stuck in the same room together, and as long as Cas already thinks he’s insane he might as well attempt to defend himself. Dean gestures at the bed. “You might want to sit down, it’s kind of a long explanation.”

Cas sits, stiffly, and Dean flips the desk chair around so he can sit backwards on it, his arms folded over the back. “So yeah, I’m not a reporter…”

And he tells him everything. Well, not everything-everything: he leaves out the stuff about Sam abandoning them for college and goes light on the details about Mom’s death. But besides that: yeah, everything. How he grew up, the creatures he’s hunted, the scars they’ve left. The truth about what brought him to Burkesville in the first place, and the theory he worked out about Branham’s ghost. Which is maybe crap now, he hasn’t thought that far ahead.

It’s different from telling Cassie. Then, he didn’t really want her to actually know, so much as he wanted to stop feeling like a dick for lying to her. This time, even though it feels like he’s laying his fucking soul bare, the longer he talks the more he realizes he actually wants Cas to see it all, every single thing about him that matters, because if there’s even a chance in hell that he’ll stick around after seeing all that, Dean has to take it.

Cas doesn’t say anything at first, once he’s finished, and Dean waits with his stomach in knots, listening to the storm outside.

“Jesus, Cas, say something,” Dean says eventually.

“Okay.”

“Okay like, you’re being a smart-ass, or—“

“No, Dean. Just, okay. To what you’re telling me.”

Dean stares. “You believe me?”

“I don’t know,” Cas says, and his voice sounds unsteady, like he’s trying to keep it together and just barely succeeding. Well, that makes two of us. “A week ago, I would have said no, absolutely not, but now? I’ve healed people. Dean. I put my hands on them and I feel some sort of power go out from me, and it’s like I’m a conduit to something bigger than myself, but it doesn’t feel foreign, or mysterious or anything. It feels like something I was always meant to find. And that’s
so far beyond anything I thought I believed in. And now, now you’re telling me it wasn’t God at all and I’m being possessed by a ghost? I don’t know, is that better or worse?”

“At least if I’m right, I can fix it.” Except the Bible isn’t here, he left it on the table at Rachael Branham’s apartment in his rush to get out. Okay, so that’s a bridge to cross tomorrow. Assuming they’re both still alive by tomorrow.

“If you’re right,” Cas echoes. “Dean, if you’re so convinced, why didn’t you tell me all this in the first place?”

Dean balks. “Like you would have believed me.”

“Well you could have at least tried! I can be open-minded, I mean, look at what I’ve gotten caught up in.”

“Yeah, but ‘I think I’m having a spiritual awakening’ is a hell of a lot different from ‘By the way, I hunt ghosts and vampires for a living.’”

“Dean, just admit that you don’t trust me.” Cas stands up and, with nowhere in particular to go, starts pacing again.

“Oh right,” Dean retorts, springing out of the chair and stalking after him. “Right, blame me for not trusting you. Because it’s not like I have any kind of experience with telling people this stuff and having it go to shit, or people who know it’s all true but they still decide it’s too fucked up for them and they can’t be around me.” Cas is standing with his back to him, arms crossed, and Dean angrily reaches for his shoulder and spins him around. “You know what happened the last time I thought I could trust someone, like, I really thought they actually had my back and I told them all this shit? She kicked me out of her apartment and said that if I was too fucking weak to just tell her that I didn’t love her anymore I should never have pretended to in the first place. So yeah, I’m sorry, I don’t fucking trust you, okay?”

Cas looks a little shellshocked, and in fairness, Dean is pretty much yelling in his face at this point. “I wouldn’t have—”

“Yeah, well how the hell was I supposed to know that, huh, Cas?” The words tumble out before Dean can stop them. “I just couldn’t fucking do that again.”

“Dean.” Cas’s voice is quiet, and he’s standing very, very close to Dean. “Why does it matter so much what I think of you?”

Dean’s heart is in his throat. “Cas, don’t…” He doesn’t know what to say, isn’t even sure he could get the words past his lips if he knew what they were. Maybe it’s a cop-out, but right now, kissing Cas feels like the only possible option, and so he does, hard and sudden and with an edge of desperation.

He’s worried Cas is just going to push him away, and honestly after all the shit he’s pulled in the past eighteen hours Dean wouldn’t blame him, but Cas kisses back instead, tilting his head to the side and wrapping his fingers in the fabric of Dean’s shirt. Dean crowds them back against the wall, both hands tangled in Cas’s hair. “Cas—”

“Don’t,” Cas warns, already sounding out of breath. “If you just shut up and kiss me none of the rest of this has to be happening.” And, yeah, Dean can’t really argue with that logic, so he does.

Eventually, they fall asleep. Or Cas does, at least, curled up with his back against Dean, his face and chest flushed, his hair a tangled mess. Dean, on the other hand, is wide awake, post-orgasm haze long since worn off and a cold mix of shame and fear nudging at him instead. He’s on a hunt for Christ’s sake—for real this time, with an honest-to-God terrifying threat out there that he doesn’t even know if they’re properly warded against, and this isn’t exactly vigilant behavior. If his dad had any idea… Dean can hear his voice in his head, beyond incredulous and straight through to fury. You let yourself get fucked while a demon was stalking you? Do you have a goddamn death wish?

Honestly he’d probably just stop at the getting fucked part. Dean rubs his hand down his face, feeling his ears burn. He’s happy—which, god, he actually is and that’s weird to be able to say—absolutely he is; Cas is pretty much incredible and god knows it’s been too long since Dean’s gotten really, properly laid. But it doesn’t matter how old he gets, when it comes to being with guys there’s some part of him that’s always going to be that seventeen-year-old kid in Fayetteville, Arkansas, fumbling through sex and trying to keep his secret boyfriend an actual secret. Sam still thinks he dropped out of school because he couldn’t keep up with the work, but that’s better than him knowing it was because Dean got outed and he couldn’t handle the possibility that the rumors would spread back to Dad. That school was shit anyway, all they did in Dean’s government class was listen to talk radio and yell about the second amendment, and they had chemistry lab in the home ec room. Hell, his GED probably means more than that diploma would have.
Dean climbs gingerly out of bed, careful not to wake Cas. He stirs a little as the springs squeak, burrowing his face deeper into the pillow, but he seems dead to the world otherwise. Dean pads across the room to the bathroom, the threadbare carpet disturbingly sticky under his bare feet. He closes the door gently behind him so that he can turn on the light and run the tap without disturbing Cas.

In the harsh florescent light, his face is pale in the mirror, freckles standing out in stark contrast on his face and his bare shoulders. His hair’s looking a little crazy too, though not quite as bad as Cas’s since he keeps it shorter, and the fading hickey’s along his neck and the edge of his jaw have been replaced by fresh ones. The sight of them sends a flush of heat across Dean’s cheeks, but in reality he kind of loves how worked up Cas gets in bed. He’s possessive, not in any way that’s creepy or that makes Dean feel like a toy or something, but in a way that means Dean doesn’t have to question whether this is something that matters to Cas or not.

Dean splashes cold water on his face and heads back out into the main room. He checks the salt lines, checks his phone—still nothing from Dad—and settles at the foot of the bed. He picks up the shotgun, checks the safety, and waits. There’s still a lot of night for them to make it through, and he’s not getting taken by surprise.

In the morning it’s raining still, a light, steady drizzle that erases the heat of the previous weekend. When Dean wakes up, it’s to Cas moving carefully around the bed, skirting Dean’s legs where they hang off the end of the bed. Groggy, Dean tries to sit up, feeling around himself for the shotgun. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Cas answers in a half-whisper. “I was just turning the air conditioning down, I got cold.” He settles back into bed, the mattress springs squeaking under him. “Did you sleep like that all night?”

Dean studies himself. He’s half-on, half-off the end of the bed, wearing nothing but his boxers, a red indent in his side where he must have rolled against the shotgun while he slept. “Maybe?”

“You can get more comfortable, you know,” Cas offers. “If you want.” He’s trying to sound nonchalant, but Dean knows he has to be remembering yesterday morning and choosing his words carefully. All Dean’s best efforts to sabotage himself aside, he realizes he’s woken up in bed with the same person two days running now, which for him is a rarity bordering on the unheard-of. And weirdly, he’s pretty sure he’s okay with it.

Feeling awkward, he scoots back on his elbows to the head of the bed, flopping somewhat inelegantly next to Cas, and the pillow at the headboard falls down over his eyes. “Friggin’…” Dean bats it away, and when it won’t stay upright on its own, flips it under his head with a humph.

Cas is laughing at him. “If a pillow’s giving you this much trouble, I think I’m even less okay with you keeping a loaded gun in the bed.”

“Shut up,” Dean mutters, but Cas’s laughter is infectious, and he can feel a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “And that shotgun’s barely loaded. Rock salt’s not gonna kill you, it’ll just sting like hell.”

“Rock salt?”

“Regular bullets don’t do shit against most of the stuff I hunt.”

“Right.” Cas grows quiet, considering, and Dean’s kicking himself for breaking the mood so quickly. He ought to at least feed Cas breakfast before he brings up the supernatural again.

“So what do we do now?” Cas asks. (We, Dean’s brain echoes, and he likes the way it sounds.)

“Well, the salt lines held, so either we just got lucky and the demon decided we weren’t worth her time, or it’s a solid defense, same as for regular spirits.” Dean sits up and looks around for his phone. It’s sitting on the desk, and he can just reach it without getting off the bed. “Shit. Still nothing.”

“Your father?”

“Yeah.” Dean tosses the phone on the bed and falls back against the pillow. “He’s kind of hard to get ahold of sometimes, but usually not this bad. I’ll bet he got my message and wants me to just figure it out on my own.”

“Why would he do that?”

Dean snorts and tosses up his hands. “Who knows. Probably figures since I took the damn case
against his orders I need to clean up my own messes.” Honestly it seems logical, even to him.

Cas can probably sense the tension in Dean’s voice, because he changes the subject. “At this point I think my track record is such I’m better off assuming that I don’t get lucky anymore.”

“Oh, I think you did last night,” Dean smirks.

It takes Cas a moment to catch up. When he does, he kicks Dean in the shin. “Asshole.”

“Yup,” Dean grins. “I think you’re right, though,” he says, turning serious again. “We oughta assume the demon’s still on our trail until we can prove otherwise. But I don’t think she’d make a move in broad daylight, with other people around. She was acting like she had some kind of plans with you, something that she probably doesn’t want to blow her cover for.”

“Comforting.”

Dean looks up him, cricking his neck to be able to see Cas clearly, and his stomach tightens at the look on Cas’s face. Any peacefulness he’d seen last night while he was asleep has melted away, and Cas now looks like he’s fighting off a panic attack. His skin is pale and the flutter of his heartbeat in his throat is rapid. “Hey.” Dean sits up and pulls Cas over by a hand around his waist. He kisses him, awkward suddenly with the newness of the moment—the sheets tangled around them, gray morning light filtering in through the window, Cas’s hair still a sex-rumpled mess—but determined. He lingers a moment, catching Cas’s lower lip between his teeth, then pulls back to stare him down. “Listen, Cas, I don’t know what kind of plan that thing thinks she has with you, but I’m not gonna let it happen, okay? I promise.”

“Okay.” Cas nods, and gives a shaky laugh. “This must just be everyday kind of stuff for you.”

They fended off a creature from hell, Cas is in his bed and Dean’s not freaking out, and he’s got the promise of someone else sticking with him on this thing, someone who knows all the shit he deals with and somehow doesn’t want to cut and run.

“Yeah, not at all,” he answers.

He wants to kiss him again, but he’s pretty sure if he does he won’t want to stop, and one thing will lead to another and they’ll be here all morning. Which sounds great, but he’s anxious to figure out their next move, and kind of hungry too, if he’s being honest. As if on cue, his stomach growls, and Dean grins sheepishly. “What do you say we head to the diner, get some breakfast and figure out our next move from there?”

“Sounds good.” Cas gets out of bed and casts around the room for his clothes. “I’m going to be doing the walk of shame, aren’t I.”

“It’s not a walk if we drive to the diner. Oh, fuck,” Dean stops short, one leg in his jeans.

“What?”

“I might have gone there yesterday with hickeys all over my neck, and Jackie called me out on it. She’s gonna put two and two together the minute we walk in.”

“No, it’s fine.” And Dean means it, mostly.

“I can lend you a scarf,” Cas smirks.

“Fuck you.”

They don’t linger once they’re both dressed. Dean opens the door cautiously, shotgun held across his body and Cas behind him, just in case demon-Aimee is waiting on the other side of the door, but the parking lot’s clear. They book it to the Impala, on account of the rain as much as anything else. The defroster is broken, so Dean rolls his window down a crack on the drive to the diner, although it’s a short enough trip it’s barely necessary.

Jackie’s not even working, as it turns out. An older waitress Dean hasn’t seen before shows them to a booth and brings over coffee while they’re looking at the menu, and if she knows they’re together, she doesn’t let on. “You boys ready to order yet?”
Cas gets toast, hash browns, and eggs, scrambled; Dean orders pancakes again. They gravitate toward their coffees when the waitress leaves, awkward together in a public space.

Cas is drumming his fingers in a steady pattern on the tabletop, index-finger through to pinky and back around again. Dean’s not even sure he realizes he’s doing it. “Hey. You okay?”

“More or less.” Cas gives him a weak smile and takes a hesitant sip of his coffee, backing off as he nearly burns his tongue. “I have no idea where I go from here, Dean. For you I think it’s not so different—I mean, you always thought of this as…a hunt, right? It’s just that your prey changed.” Cas stares out the window, his blue eyes not really focused on anything. “I was working on my thesis. How does any of this fit in with that? Has anything, I mean anything I’ve studied been real at all, or do I have to throw the whole thing out and start over again?”

“Don’t worry about that yet, okay? We still don’t even know for sure what’s going on,” Dean tries to reassure him. “It could be the whole demon stuff is barely even related to the miracles.”

Cas gives him a look. “You don’t actually believe that’s true.”

“Well, no,” Dean admits. “But hey: you told me when we first met that it doesn’t matter so much what’s true as much as that people believe it, right?” Or something like that. Dean feels like he’s probably garbled Cas’s original message beyond recognition; Cas is so eloquent and smart when he talks, and Dean feels in comparison like he’s just spitting out garbage.

“If the truth of a thing is unknowable, undetermined,” Cas counters. “Once something’s in front of you and undeniable… I don’t know. But you’re right, I can cross that bridge once I get to it. Once I know I’ll still be alive to actually write my thesis.”

“Well I didn’t mean it quite that morbidly.” Dean wraps his hands around the coffee mug and leans forward. “But yeah, let’s figure out our game plan. I think we should still focus on Branham’s Bible. It’s the best lead we’ve got, and that way we can at least rule out my original theory if it doesn’t work. Aimee might have just been bluffing, trying to keep us from doing the thing she doesn’t want us to do by telling us to do it—you know, reverse psychosis or whatever?”

“Psychology.”

“That one.”

“And what, you want to burn it? Am I remembering that right?” Dean nods, and Cas looks a little scandalized. “I don’t know, Dean. I’m not a very religious person, but that seems sacrilegious even to me. At the very least you’re destroying an old woman’s family heirloom.”

“Yeah I know, it sucks. But that’s how this shit works, spirits always latch onto things that are important, stuff that’s memorable to the dead person, and so it’s usually memorable to the living, too. It’d be a lot more convenient if they were connected to meaningless shit like old socks or lottery tickets.” That earns him a smile from Cas.

“So we just destroy it on a whim and hope we’re right?”

“More or less.” Dean starts to say more, but he sees the waitress approaching out of the corner of his eye, and he holds off until she’s got their plates in front of them and refilled their coffee.

“The thing is,” he continues once she’s gone, “if it works, we save a bunch of people, right? And I figure that’s worth the risk of being wrong.”

Cas doesn’t answer right away, just pokes at his food with his fork, spearing a few hash browns and nibbling at them carefully. Dean’s about ready to ask him what’s wrong when Cas blurts out, “Save them from what?”

“Huh?” Dean mumbles around a mouthful of pancakes.

“What are we saving people from? I know there’s a demon, and she—it—has some kind of plan, and that’s got to be bad, obviously. But we don’t know what that plan is, or if it’s even connected to the faith healings or the Message movement or anything.”

“Something’s making that happen though, Cas, even if we don’t know what it is, and right now either restless spirit or demon are our best options.”

Cas still looks unconvinced. “Are there… god, I feel stupid asking this. Are there—good spirits?”

Shit, Dean feels like he should have seen this coming. “Not in my experience, Cas,” he answers seriously, and winces when he sees Cas’s face fall. “I get it, everyone wants to believe in Casper the friendly ghost, and it makes since, yeah? Good and evil, heaven and hell, if there are demons there must be angels too? But it doesn’t work that way. Far as I can tell, at least. In twenty-two years, I haven’t come across a single goddamn spirit or monster or whatever that was in anyway
“You didn’t feel it, though,” Cas’s voice is quiet. “The…spirit, or whatever. At those meetings, when I was healing people? Dean, it felt right, it felt good and bright and… I don’t know, just right,” he says again. “Am I just that stupid, to get fooled so completely?”

Dean feels like Cas is pleading with him, and he can’t handle it. “You’re not stupid, Cas, honest. It could be something new—I mean, hell, I’ve never seen a demon before, maybe this is just a whole mess of firsts for me.” He casts around for another theory. “Or maybe with the meetings, it’s like that group psychosis thing, where if everyone in a group thinks and expects the same thing it gets amplified? And maybe the demon or whatever is just magnifying that.”

Cas still looks unconvinced and half-disgusted with himself, so Dean reaches across the table and grabs his hand, nosy Southern onlookers be damned. “Hey. Cas, listen, even if it turns out to be the capital-D devil himself and you were following him like he was a fucking cherub, I’m not going to judge you, okay? This shit is weird and it messes with your head, and if you get tricked you can’t blame yourself for falling in the trap.”

Cas gives him a weak smile and squeezes Dean’s hand before extracting his own and reaching for his coffee. “How do you deal with this every day?”

“ Honestly? A lot of booze.” Dean spears a forkful of pancakes and swipes it through a puddle of syrup. “That’s the main problem with this case, I’m telling you.”

“Once this is all over we can remedy that. You still owe me a drink, after all.”

He’d almost forgotten about that, and now Dean finds himself wondering if he’d be sitting here right now if they’d just gone out for the quick drink he thought he was looking for. “You’re right, I do.”

“So.” Cas digs into his food in earnest. “And I can’t believe I’m asking this—how do we steal this Bible?”

They toss ideas back and forth in hushed tones—they are planing a theft, after all, not to mention petty arson. It’s late for breakfast, especially on a Monday morning, so the diner is mostly empty, save for an older couple a few booths away and a guy in a suit and tie sitting at the counter. Dean’s still a little paranoid about being overheard. Given how gossipy he knows some of the Burkesville residents to be, they can’t risk anything getting passed around.

By the time they finish their meal, they’ve worked out a tentative plan in which Cas asks to interview Rachael Branham again and acts as a distraction while Dean steals the book. It’s a good plan, since he’d have no reason to suspect Cas—not that she knows to blame Dean, either, for the attempted theft, but he doesn’t have the same credibility that Cas does. “The only thing I don’t like is us splitting up,” Dean admits. “Aimee might not be the only who’s possessed, and I don’t want to leave you to fend for yourself.”

“I was fine yesterday, and if anything happens I’ll be fine again,” Cas assures him. “We can’t do this if we’re not willing to take risks.”

“I guess,” Dean replies. It’s not that he doesn’t want to take risks, he just doesn’t want to risk Cas. He looks around the diner. “Let’s get the check and go.”

“Dean?”

“Yeah?” He hasn’t seen their waitress in a while, but she can’t be too swamped with the three customers she has.

“Dean?” Cas sounds panicked.

“What?” Cas is staring out the window, and Dean follows his gaze, heart in his throat, half-expecting to see Aimee standing on the other side of the glass, but there’s nothing there, just a rainy sky and mostly-empty parking lot. “What is it?”

Cas just keeps staring. “The rain.”

Dean still doesn’t get it, until he realizes with a jolt that Cas isn’t looking out the window, he’s looking at it.

The raindrops on the pane are frozen in place.
There’s the creak of the front door opening, the jingle from the bells hanging over the door. A
man walks into the room—medium height, slightly balding, an insurance-salesman kind of
friendly look on his face. He loosens his tie a notch, shoves his hands in the pockets of his coat,
and looks around the room. When his gaze lands on Dean and Cas, he smiles a broad, toothless
smile. “Good morning, gentlemen.”

Dean pulls his gun on him, even though he knows it’s almost certainly pointless. “What the fuck
are you?”

The man’s smile dims to an almost disappointed look, his eyes wide. “You know, that’s fairly
rude, but I suppose I shouldn’t expect any better.” He snaps his fingers, and a chair slides
across the room and comes to a halt in front of their booth. The man settles down in it with a tight smile,
angling the chair towards Cas. “But I’m here to speak to your friend, anyway. You can call me
Zachariah.”

“What do you want with Cas?”

“Cast?” Zachariah laughs. “Oh, that’s precious. The things that manage to stick…”

“Answer the question,” Dean growls.

Zachariah glares at him, then at the gun still pointed at him. “Put it down,” he snaps, and Dean
gasps as his skin blisters against the suddenly white-hot metal. He drops the gun with a clatter,
palms stinging.

“Dean?”

“Ignore him,” Zachariah says, turning back towards Cas. “To answer his question, ‘Cast’: I want
you. Or, more accurately, I need you,” he amends. “I don’t particularly like it, but that’s the
situation we’re in.”

“Who’s in?” Cas asks, suspicious, casting a glance at Dean.

“Heaven,” Zachariah answers simply.

They both stare, uncomprehending. Eventually Cas says, haltingly, “You mean, you’re—”

“An angel, yes.”

“Bullshit,” Dean snaps, at the same time as Cas says, “You can’t—”

Zachariah laughs. “Oh, hold onto your hat, kiddo, because it gets a whole lot more interesting.
You are, too.”

What the fuck? “Cas, he’s lying.” Dean’s mind is reeling, but he’s certain of that point. “Angels
don’t exist.”

“Um, hello?” Zachariah spreads his hands. “Sitting right in front of you, kid. I froze
Time, what do you think I am?”

“A demon.”

“Don’t insult me, not one of those insects is powerful enough to do this.”

“If you’re so powerful, then how come you don’t help, huh? If angels existed, there wouldn’t be
demons and monsters and shit running loose and hurting innocent—”

His voice cuts off suddenly, and no matter how much he strains he can’t make a sound.

“You’re depressing, did you know that?” Zachariah rolls his shoulders and turns back to Cas.
“Besides, I wanted to talk to Cas here, and you’re dominating the conversation.”

Cas looks at him warily, his gaze jumping back and forth between Dean and Zachariah. “What
did you mean when you said I’m one?” he asks slowly.

Damn it Cas, don’t encourage him, Dean thinks, but can’t do a thing about it, his voice still on
mute.

Zachariah leans back in his chair, a satisfied look on his face. “Exactly that. You’re an angel—
well, you were one. You fell.”

Cas looks shellshocked. “Like the devil?” he asks.

“You know your history. I’m impressed. Well. You know the human version of it, anyway. No,
your rebellion wasn’t as serious as Lucifer’s—I mean, you’re on Earth, as a human, which is bad,
“You know I can freeze you out, too,” Zachariah snaps. “I’m only keeping you in the loop because I thought it might make Cas here a little more receptive, but I’m pretty close to changing my mind on that.”

“Don’t,” Cas warns, his voice cold and unexpectedly commanding. “If you harm him again I will refuse to cooperate with you in anyway, and I think you need my cooperation, otherwise you wouldn’t be asking and explaining, you’d have just taken me.”

Zachariah purses his lips and nods. “You’re perceptive. Alright then, hands off the human. Now where was I?”

“I fell.”

“Right. So when an angel falls, their Grace falls, too. Literally. Think of it as, oh, your angelic soul, to put it in human terms. What’s left of you gets born as a human, but the inconvenient thing is that the Grace is still out there, and it still has all the power of an angel. Which means that in the wrong hands, it’s a formidable weapon.” He pauses. “You see what I’m getting at here?”

“The Grace falls near where the angel is born?”

“Yes, so in this case, it’s—”

“Here,” Cas interrupts. “It’s by the river.”

Zachariah looks impressed. “Exactly.”

“That’s what I feel,” Cas continues, almost in a daze, and he looks at Dean, and god the excitement and hope in his eyes might be the most painful thing Dean’s ever seen. “At the meetings, and healing people—I told you, it feels like more than me, and right. It’s not a restless spirit, or demons—”

“Oh, goodness.” Zachariah scoffs. “Is that what his best guess was?”

Dean channels as much I will fucking end you into his glare as he can, and fumes silently.

“We had a few other theories,” Cas says cautiously, and Christ, Dean’s losing him.

“Well, mystery solved,” Zachariah says condescendingly. “So, here’s the part I hate: we need you to take it back.”

“Take what back?”

“Your Grace. See, normally, as a fallen angel?” Zachariah grimaces. “You’re an abomination. I mean, you fell from Heaven for a reason—”

“What was it?”

“Oh, like I’m going to tell you that.” Zachariah rolls his eyes. “But look, the point is that you’re not the only one who’s found your Grace. Thanks to the whole little human religion that’s gravitated to this site, Hell found it, too. I think you ran into one of their messengers yesterday?”

Cas nods. “Remember I said that, in the wrong hands, an angel’s Grace can be a powerful weapon? Well, that’s the situation we’re looking at now. Hell’s sent its demons after it for the sort of plans that you barely have security clearance for, and your human pal certainly doesn’t. And, unfortunately for me, the only way to properly secure that Grace is for you to take it back.”

Cas is silent for a long moment. Dean feels like he can’t breathe. He just wants his fucking voice back, wants to be able to talk some sense into Cas, because this is all bullshit, right? It has to be. He doesn’t know what Zachariah is, but it’s all some kind of a fucked-up trap, and Cas is walking headlong into it.

“Well? You get it?” Zachariah is impatient.

“What happens if I take it back?” Cas asks slowly, fearful.

“What do you think happens, you’re an angel again. Welcome back to Heaven, we’re so glad that you could come. Look, the real question you should be worried about is: what happens if you don’t take it back? Because odds are better than good that the demons are going to get their hands on it instead, and if you think things are bad now, you’re not going to like what happens to the Earth when that scenario plays out.” He makes a show of checking a nonexistent watch. “We’re playing it to the wire as it is, buddy. Time to make a decision.”
“Give Dean his voice back.”

“You’re not actually as—”

“Do it,” Cas growls.

Zachariah shrugs. “Okay, fine.”

“Cas?” Dean tries, and thank god, finally. “Cas, listen to me, you can’t trust him, okay? I don’t know what he is but he’s lying to you, man.”

“How do you know?” Cas asks, and he sounds like he’s close to tears.

“Because angels aren’t real!”

“Why? Because nothing good has ever happened to you? God, I’m sorry Dean, but that’s not enough proof for me!”

“Goddammit, Cas, just trust me on this, okay?” Dean pleads.

“If I say yes,” Cas says suddenly, turning back to Zachariah, “you said I fell before. I stepped out of line or something. How do you know it’s not just going to happen again?”

“Oh, you don’t think we have a reset button built in? You won’t be a threat to us once you’re returned to factory settings. Believe me, we could have brought you back and fixed you all along, it just wasn’t worth the time or effort. Until now, that is.”

“You mean you’re gonna fucking retcon him?” Dean demands, rage brimming in him even though it’s all a lie, the whole thing’s a fucking lie. “So he’s not gonna remember any of this—anything?”

“Think of it as a kindness,” Zachariah answers coldly, and he’s looking at Cas, not Dean. “You won’t have to live with the knowledge that you defiled yourself with a human.”

Dean can feel his face burning, and Cas bristles. “I don’t know you, and I don’t trust you,” he says slowly. “And if you think insulting me and the people I care about is the way to convince me, you can go fuck yourself.”

Zachariah looks amused. “You might not trust me, but your gut does, or however humans say it. You know I’m right, there’s some part of you that does. And yes, insults—probably not my best persuasion tactic.” He narrows his eyes. “Threats, on the other hand, I think will work.”

He twists his hand, and Dean folds double, pain lancing through his lower back in excruciating waves. “Late-stage kidney failure,” Zachariah announces. “I think it looks good on him.”

“Dean!” Cas’s frantic shouting barely breaks through the haze of pain and nausea rolling over him. Dean white-knuckles the table and tries not to throw up.

“Let’s see, what else should we give him? Liver disease? He’s already working towards that one on his own, anyway… Ooh, how about stomach cancer, that’s one of my favorites.”

“Stop it!” Cas’s voice breaks.

“Why?” Zachariah prompts.

Cas, no, please no—but Dean can’t say it fast enough.

“I’ll do it, I’ll come with you.”

The absence of pain is almost as shocking as its onset. Dean’s lying facedown on the booth, tacky red vinyl sticking to his cheek, and he groans, dizzy as he pushes himself up.

Cas and Zachariah are gone.

“No—no no no no, shit!” Dean pushes himself up and out of the booth and runs for the door, ignoring the angry protests from the waitress (who’s finally reappeared again) that he hasn’t paid for their food. “Cas?” he bellow, but the parking lot is empty, just the rain steadily falling again. Fuck. Zachariah took him, and they could be fucking anywhere right now, assuming he’s even still—

Stop, Dean tells himself harshly, because if he goes there he’s going to lose it completely. Get in the car, drive, do something. If there’s even the slightest chance Zachariah was telling the truth, there’s only one place they’ll be.

He runs all three of Burkesville’s traffic lights on his way out of town, flying down the road a
good twenty miles above the speed limit. He realizes he’s hoping, praying practically that
Zachariah’s story was real, because otherwise he’ll never find Cas, never know what happened to
him. On the other hand, if Zachariah is actually a goddamn angel—if Cas… “Fuck,” he swears,
slamming his fist into the steering wheel. “Fuck, fuck!”

Just let me get there in time. Please, let me get there in time…

The field is empty when he gets there, tents still standing but no people, no cars, no congregations
drunk on the promise of a miracle. He leaves the road and drives straight up to the main tent, the
Imapala’s wheels tearing up the wet soil. “Cas?” he yells, practically tumbling out of the car the
minute he kills the engine. “Zachariah? I’m gonna kill you, you son of a bitch! You hear me?”

No one answers. Dean charges into the main tent, but it’s empty, folding chairs sitting in quiet,
clean rows, waiting for worshipers to fill them. He ducks back out into the rain, running to check
the smaller tents, but all of them are empty, like the Message movement had never been there, like
none of this actually happened at all. And still, nothing, no sign of Cas or Zachariah or even any
indication that they’ve been here at all.

Fuck. Dean stands in the field, hands clenched in useless fists by his head, turning in circles and
hoping he’ll see what he’s looking for. The whole three-hundred-and-sixty degrees, nothing.
“Cas, goddammit, are you out there?”

Silence, but he’s got to look everywhere. He can’t give up now, can’t let himself stop until he’s
exhausted every possibility. Not the meeting grounds, so where else? A shimmer hits his gaze
through the tree line, and he locks on it. The river. Now.

The trees are thick behind the tents, hugging a sharp bend in the river, and Dean can’t see through
them clearly enough to know if there’s anyone on the other side. He pushes through along the
edge of the copse, where the underbrush is less dense, and when he clears the last trunk and
reaches the bank, he sees him: Cas, standing in two feet of water, shivering, his hair and shirt
plastered to his skin by the rain, gazing into the water like there’s a lover waiting for him on the
other side.

He leans forward, hand reaching below the water’s surface, fingers outstretched, just as Dean yells
out, “Cas! Wait!”

Zachariah, standing on the bank, makes a long-suffering move as if he’s about to swat a
particularly persistent mosquito, but he never makes it as far as whatever he’s planning to do to
Dean. He doesn’t need to.

Cas looks up and catches Dean’s eyes at the same moment as his fingers connect with something
underwater, and he jolts back with a small gasp. Light begins to spread through the water from
under his hand, white-blue light that pulses as it climbs towards the surface. Cas looks at Dean
again, and there’s wonder, and then, suddenly, panic in his face. “Dean, close your eyes!”

He does, without thinking, without remembering that he has to save him, that if he runs or swims
or fucking crawls there fast enough he might still be able to stop it. There’s heat on his face and
the palms of his hands, held up in front of his eyes in an instinctive move, the burns on his palms
throbbing again in the sudden blast. Even with his eyes closed he can see the light, practically feel
it as a living thing, poking at the seal of his eyelids for a crack to squeeze through. It flares up,
even brighter, and then suddenly it’s gone.

When he opens his eyes, the river is empty. Zachariah, the light—Cas. All of them, gone.

No.

He plunges into the river, diving down to the spot where Cas was standing, coming up empty, and
it’s so fucking cold but he keeps diving until his lips turn blue.

No.

There’s nothing on the bank, not even footprints. It’s silence, except for the rain hitting the leaves
and the gentle tug of the river’s current, and Dean sits on the bank, soaked through to his skin and
trying not to cry like a fucking child.
He doesn’t know how long he sits there, but it’s long enough for his boots to sink a few inches into the thick mud at the bank of the river and for the rain to eventually taper off. There’s a pair of squirrels in the trees behind him having a heated argument and the droning buzz of cicadas, but it’s all sort of faded out at the corners of his consciousness. Eventually, he hears footsteps approaching, but he doesn’t turn to look.

“Excuse me? Sir, is this your car out on the field?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, could I ask you to move it, please? You can’t park so close to the tent, we’re holding a meeting in a little while here.”

Dean stands slowly, staggering a little as the blood flows back into his numb legs.

“Hey, are you alright?” The brother (he can’t remember which one he is) reaches out a hand to try to steady Dean, but he bats it away.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re soaked through, can I offer you something warm to drink? Maybe something to dry off with?”

“Leave me the fuck alone!” Dean barks, and it startles the concern right out of the man’s eyes. He raises his hands as if in surrender and lets Dean pass.

Curious faces stare at him as he gets into the Impala and backs it down onto the road. He tries to ignore them, but there’s something about the question in their eyes that starts to look like judgement, and he can hear it in his head. You couldn’t save him. Not couldn’t as in it was impossible, but as in someone better or faster or smarter would have.

Once he’s on the road, there’s fewer people, less scrutiny to deal with. Dean realizes he’s heading back into town, and then that he doesn’t have any reason to go back, and then, a second later, that he doesn’t have any destination. The case, if it even was one, is effectively done, and Dad’s not working the Ohio job anymore. He’s just driving, no purpose in mind, beyond running from his mistakes, like he always does.

He’s trying to decide whether to pull off and try to call Dad again, or if he wants to turn around and drive south—hell, at least he knows if he heads in that direction he can drown himself in alcohol—when he sees a familiar figure: a young woman walking on the side of the road, thin and willowy, a yellow raincoat pulled up over her long brown hair. He slams on the breaks and storms out of the car.

“What the fuck did you do with him?” Dean yells.

Aimee blinks and flinches as Dean charges towards her. “Dean? What are you talking about?”
“Don’t play dumb with me, what did you do with Cas?” He’s grabbing her by the shoulders, shaking her so hard her teeth rattle, and his voice is raw. “I swear to God, when I figure out what you did, I am going to end you.”

“Get your hands off me!” Aimee stomps on his foot and tries to twist out of his grasp. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, let me go!”

“Don’t fuck with me, I know you black-eyed bastards are responsible.” He can’t believe Zachariah’s story, has to hang on to the hope that Cas was simply kidnapped by creatures he maybe stands half-a-chance of fighting. Hell of a best scenario, but it’s all he’s got.

“What are you talking about?” Aimee’s fighting back tears, and she looks like she’s about two seconds away from screaming bloody murder.

*Why won’t it fight back? Why won’t it hold on?* “Christo,” he spits, trying to lure the thing out, but Aimee just ignores him and draws in a deep breath.

He lets go and steps back before she screams. “Christo,” he tries again. “Christo, Jesus fucking Christ!”

“Don’t you ever touch me again!” Aimee hisses at him, and takes off running toward the meeting ground as fast as she can.

She’s not possessed anymore. Shit, he just threatened a teenager, and if the demon’s gone, it’s because there’s nothing left for it here anymore. No Cas—no angelic weapon of mass destruction to steal.

It’s like he knows, finally, in his gut. He can’t give himself permission to actually think about it yet, it’s too much and he doesn’t know how to deal with it, but it’s there, waiting patiently like some sort of coiled dark secret, ready for him to uncover.

Dean gets back in the Impala and turns it viciously around, heading south. He’s going to need a seriously staggering amount of alcohol to get through this.

* * *

Everything is mostly a very deep, booze-induced haze for a very long time after that, punctuated by moments of gut-wrenching clarity.

**Mom didn’t die because angels don’t exist, she died because angels are massive dicks.**

*If you’d just kissed him again, you might still be in that motel room.*

*You don’t exist to him anymore; they’ve wiped his whole memory so it’s as if none of this ever happened in the first place.*

*At least he won’t remember how badly you fucked things up.*

He gets kicked out of the bar eventually, too shit-faced to even protest. They leave him propped up against the side of the building by the dumpsters, a note in his pocket telling him he can come in and get his keys from the bartender when he can walk in a straight line again. He sleeps, he thinks, and when he wakes up it’s nearly dark out but he already has the hangover to end all hangovers. Dean heads back into the bar, but they refuse to serve him. They will give him his keys back, though, so he drives himself to a liquor store, then a cheap motel with no less than three hookers hanging out in the parking lot, hoping to score. They seem pretty interested in him, but he pushes past their catcalls to his room, locks the door behind him, and gets started on the bottle of whiskey.

By four AM, he’s throwing up in the bathroom, and he’s so violently sick that, in a brief moment of clear-headedness, it scares the living fuck out of him. He can’t remember most of the past twelve hours, and he wanted to forget, yeah, but his feelings, not when he undressed down to his boxers and socks or how he got a rapidly-swelling split lip. *You could actually drink yourself to death,* he realizes, and the fact that he’s not sure whether or not he cares is enough to shock what tiny amount of self-preservation he still has into action. He stands under a cold shower until he can’t feel his legs anymore, drinks what feels like half a gallon of water, and eventually falls asleep on his stomach.

The headache that hits him when he wakes up the next morning is enough to make him wish he hadn’t tried quite so hard to keep himself alive. He’s sick again, and once he finally feels like he can keep a little water down for at least twenty minutes, he hunts around for his phone. Still nothing from Dad. He tries calling again, not because he really wants to talk to John Winchester right now, but because he needs the distraction of a hunt. *Give me a job to do, something to kill. A direction to drive in. Anything to keep me from thinking about him.*

Dad doesn’t pick up.
He finds route 40 outside Nashville and takes it west, only ever pulling off the highway long enough to fill the tank. He eats gas station food, drinks himself to sleep at night in shitty motels to the background babble of the home-improvement channel. It’s not a healthy way of coping, even he knows that, but Dean isn’t sure there is an appropriate way of dealing with your romantic interest of half a week turning out to be a downed angel, who then abruptly powers up and disappears from this dimension, with no reason to ever come back and no way for you to know if it could have been as real and as permanent as you hoped it could be. A couple of pints of Ben & Jerry’s and some rebound sex aren’t going to put a dent in any of that.

In the back of his mind, he knows where he’s driving, even though it’s not like that’s going to help anything either. Given his track record, he’ll probably just make everything worse, but he’s running out of options here. He knows how to hunt, how to take care of people, how to drive fifteen hours in a straight shot. He doesn’t know how to be useless, and if he keeps driving too many more miles without a purpose the solitude and silence is going to get the best of him. And Dad still isn’t answering his goddamn phone…

* * *

It’s nearly three in the morning when he finally makes it to Palo Alto. Not the timeframe he was hoping for, but it turns out California traffic is hell. Why people even want to live in this state, he has no fucking idea.

He finds Sam’s apartment easily enough—he memorized the address the school office gave him over the phone (thank god for freshmen on student work assistance who only need a little shameless flirting to get them to completely disregard federal privacy laws). It’s small, part of a run-down looking neighborhood, but in a college-student-population rather than people-get-murdered-here kind of way, and more than anything else it looks normal. Dean feels a pang of jealousy, which he promptly shoves down.

On a mission here, not a pity-party, Winchester.

The lock is easy to pick, but there’s a safety chain on the door, which he’d rather not bust, so Dean jimmys open a window instead. His feet barely hit the floor before six-foot-four of muscle attacks him, and Dean’s instincts kick in. The kid’s moves haven’t changed, and he’s a little rusty (although not as much as Dean expected him to be—he’s impressed), but he has the element of surprise on his side, and Dean ends up on his back, grinning up at his baby brother’s baffled face.

“Hey-a, Sammy. Miss me?”

“What the fuck?” Sam hisses. He lifts his knee from where he’s got Dean pinned and sits down hard next to him on the floor. “Dean, I thought you were a burglar! What are you doing here?”

“Well, you wouldn’t answer my calls….” Dean pulls himself up, rubbing his jaw where Sam’s fist caught it. “Jeez, you’ve still got that left hook.”

“Dean. What is going on?”

God, there’s so much he wants to tell him, has to tell someone, because it’s eating him up inside, but there’s a gulf four years wide between them now, and he doesn’t know how to cross it. Besides, he’s here for a real reason, not his own stupid problems. It can wait.

“Dad’s away on a hunting trip, and he hasn’t been home in a few days.”
He never tells Sam about that week in Kentucky. And it’s not like he never has a good opportunity. When Sam drags him to that faith healer after he electrocutes himself into heart failure, his brother can tell Dean’s uncomfortable and suspicious, and there’s nothing stopping Dean from telling him the truth. I’ve seen this before, and it wasn’t the power of God, it was the broken pieces of an angel who turned out to be one of the best people I’ve ever known. He’s not sure whether this is the same kind of situation—how many fallen angels can there be?—but Sam is so confident, so determined to find some way to save Dean, that he has to play along for his sake. He can’t say he’s exactly surprised when the whole thing turns out to be a sham—although the reaper is new, and when they find out exactly what saved Dean’s life, he’s guilty and ashamed all over again.

“You had no way of knowing,” Sam tells him, but that’s not true. Sam had no way of knowing. Dean, on the other hand: firsthand knowledge of this kind of bullshit, and he still didn’t do anything to stop it.

A year later, he gets his chance again, when they’re in Rhode Island and Sam’s convinced an angel is orchestrating vigilante justice killings, and again, Dean bails, and blusters and lies his way through the case. This time it’s not about not believing—Sam’s actually the one who, for all his confidence, seems a little uneasy about the idea of heaven putting out a hit on someone. As far as Dean’s concerned, the angels he’s encountered? Something like this is right up their alley. But Sam expects him to protest: after all, Dean’s not the one who prays every day or agonizes over the morality of their job. He can’t just admit, after all this time, that he’s known about angels all along and never told Sam. He’ll want to know why: why keep it a secret, why not tell Dad—why not save Dad. Dean looks at Sam and he still sees his baby brother, eager to believe in the good in the world, innocent enough that it’s still a possibility for him. He’s already helped to shatter enough of that innocence over the years; he can’t break this hope, too.

Basically the whole thing is a giant fucking mess, and he’s resigned himself to the fact that Sam is never going to know about it. It’s probably better like this, anyway.

He wonders sometimes about heaven, since apparently it does exist in one form or another: if Mom’s there, if the church is actually right about how to get a ticket in (and which church, because once he starts looking it turns out everyone has a different idea about how that particular contract plays out). He wonders if he could make himself believe something he still doesn’t have any faith in, just for the sake of getting in, or if heaven’s really worth it at all—what he’s seen of angels isn’t exactly promising, Cas excluded. As an angel, though, and without his memories of Dean or life on earth or whatever made him fall in the first place, would he even be the same person? Dean’s not sure he wants to find out, but at the same time, he can’t fathom giving up the possibility of seeing him again. So it’s something he’s working out.

Then Sam dies, and it turns out none of it matters anyhow.

He’s done a lot of unpleasant things in his life, but waking up in his own grave tops the list. It’s sheer blind panic that gets him out of the rough coffin and clawing up through three feet of loose dirt. That panic continues to roll over him in waves as he lays curled on his side in the dirt, gasping and shuddering, thanking all the gods he doesn’t believe in that whoever buried him was a goddamn idiot and dug the grave so shallow.

It’s a long while before he can finally sit up, and that’s when he notices the trees.

He doesn’t know for sure right away, but suspicion starts to build in his mind pretty quickly after that. The high-pitched static and broken windows at the gas station throw him off—Zachariah just showed up in a normal-looking body, and his voice might have been kind of annoying but it didn’t make Dean’s ears bleed. Could be a demon (although that doesn’t make much since, seeing as they’re the ones that dragged him down there in the first place), could be Sam had something to do with it—but honestly, finally seeing his brother and Bobby, his tiny dysfunctional family back together again, solving the puzzle of exactly what pulled him free feels like less of a priority.

When Pamela gives them a name—Castiel—Dean thinks his heart’s going to pound out of his chest. That’s just a coincidence, right? There’s no reason to think Cas’s name as an angel, assuming he even has one, is remotely similar to the name his human parents gave him. But it’s two pieces to a puzzle that’s starting to fit together, and Dean can feel his hopes rising even as he tries to tamp them down.

He can’t say anything, though, not after whatever—whoever—the thing is burns Pamela’s eyes out of her skull. Yeah, I might have slept with him? But before he had eye-melting powers, so. Still not going to go over well.
Demons running scared from something bigger than their pay grade, Sam acting cagey as shit, and finally it’s more than Dean can handle, and he finds himself standing with Bobby in an abandoned barn painted with every sigil known to humanity, waiting. He can feel his palms sweating and he rubs them, anxious, on his pant legs.

“You nervous, kid?” Bobby asks, hands paused over the summoning ritual spread out over the table. “Cause we can stop and think this through more if you want.”

He is nervous, but not for the reasons Bobby thinks. “I’m fine,” Dean mutters gruffly. “Light the damn thing already.”

They do the summoning, Dean’s heart racing through every step. Everything falls silent after the last word is spoken, and he and Bobby look at each other warily. Then there’s a thundering crash and an electric hum in the air, like a storm just opened up right above their heads, and Dean near about jumps out of his skin.

“Looks like we got ourselves a visitor,” Bobby says grimly.

The lights blow out, then come back on in a shower of sparks. The doors are swung open, and Dean squints and covers his head with his arm, not daring to breathe.

And then Cas walks into the barn.

He looks older somehow—not physically, exactly, but as if he’s seen more, done more, been more than he was when Dean knew him last. He walks with a purpose, his eyes cut to a determined frown, surveying the barn, the remains of the ritual laid out over the table, the shotgun clutched tight in Bobby’s hands.

Dean doesn’t know how to begin. “You’re—”

Cas regards him solemnly. “I’m the one who gripped you tight and raised you from perdition.”

“Cas.”

A frown pinches Castiel’s brow. “My name is Castiel,” he corrects Dean. “I am an angel of the Lord.”

“Yeah, I know,” Dean says on a shaky laugh.

“Dean, what the hell?” Bobby’s still holding the shotgun, and he looks like he’s about to use it. Before Dean can explain—although how the hell he’s going to explain this one, he has no idea—Cas lifts two fingers and gestures at Bobby, who slumps bonelessly to the ground.

“Jesus, Cas, what did you do to him?”

“I didn’t harm him. He’s simply asleep, so that I can speak to you about your mission.”

“My mission?” Dean’s throat tightens. Seeing Cas again, after all these years of thinking he’d never get that chance, he’d almost forgotten Zachariah’s promise to wipe the slate clean. Think of it as a kindness. “Cas, why would the angels rescue me from hell?”

“Good things do happen, Dean.”

That’s not what he meant, and even with Cas standing in front of him again, he’s not particularly inclined to believe it. “Not in my experience.”

“What’s the matter?” Cas tilts his head to the side and stares at Dean as if he’s looking into his soul, his eyes the same fucking fathomless blue Dean remembers. “You don’t think you deserve to be saved,” he says slowly, wonder in his voice.

Dean flushes, wholly unprepared for Cas’s words to hit so hard. No one knows him like that, or if they do, they’re certainly not letting on. “Cas, why’d you do it?” Please. Please.

“Because God commanded it,” Cas responds evenly. “Because we have work for you.”

His heart sinks. “You don’t know who I am,” Dean says, and acknowledging it out loud shouldn’t hurt this much. It’s been three years, and after hell it feels like forty or more. This shouldn’t matter, after everything he’s been through (and everything he’s done). It was barely anything more than a one-night stand.

Cas seems puzzled, and oddly hurt. “I know who you are, Dean Winchester,” he contradicts, moving closer, staring him down. He looks smaller in the oversized trench coat he’s wearing, tie done up backwards, but his voice is authoritative all the same. “I fought my way to find you in hell, and I knit you back together, molecule by molecule. I have held your soul in my hands.”

He’s close enough now that they’re breathing the same air, and it’s all Dean can do to hold
himself back. “I do not think that there is any other being in existence who knows you as well as I do.”

It’s fucking terrifying, and too much—and at the same time, it’s a gift he never thought he’d be given. “You knew me before, too,” Dean says horsely.

Cas does the head-tilt thing again. “I was only recently assigned to you.”

“Yeah, I know, you don’t remember. But you’re gonna, Cas. I promise.”

_He’ll remember._ Because if there’s one thing Dean still has it left in him to fight for, it’s this.

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