Normal

by Lochinvar

Summary

Sam Winchester is a genius, but the canon skips over how a homeless boy, living on the road, loved but neglected, manages to get into one of the best universities in the world. Does not happen in a few weeks. And I never bought the idea that he wanted to abandon his family and that becoming normal and safe were his main goals. And his relationship with
Dean in those early years was more complicated than just Big Brother and Little Sammy. (And I am not referring to subtext.)

And how did he keep such a big secret for such a long time from two of the best Hunters in North America?

Some scenes of Sam's life, from ages eleven to eighteen, with an epilogue after Stanford. Supernatural procedural, with insights into some of the science behind spells.

And Dean wakes up, finally. There is romance and love, but no sex onstage.

And a shout out to Bobby Singer and Pastor Jim Murphy, and how they helped Sam.

If discussions of killing witches and monsters upsets you, don't read.

Teen-rated because of a little language and allusions to adult feelings and situations. And a little scary stuff discussed, but will alert in beginning chapter notes.

Notes

References to dealing with bullies and potentially bad people off-stage.

Like many of my works, some autographical detail. I have lived and/or been to and/or driven in and through the places I write about and know something of hanging out with very smart people, living in abandoned property, and the behind the scenes of college administration and procedures.

The "Talismen" tag refers to an ongoing theme in my works: the civilians who know and support the work of the Hunters, usually in very practical ways, but sometimes unknown to the Hunters themselves. Like the relationship between the Underground and Allied troops in World War II.

Some variance on canon to suit my plot and timelines - sorry.

Some variance on the time-space continuum to suit my plot and timelines - sorry.

I own nothing; rely on the talent and kindness of strangers.

No Beta; all mistakes are mine to claim and bear.

Kudos and comments and bookmarks much appreciated - thank you. The best kind of payment, other than pirate gold.

This is a gift to BurningTea, who writes long detailed pieces with imaginative mythology and great original characters - thanks!

Thanks for reading!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Emancipation

Chapter Summary

Sam lies. Bobby helps.

On the road - 1994-1999

By the time Sam Winchester turned sixteen, he’d created a documented backstory of abandonment and orphanhood, complete with forged papers aged in motel microwaves and the random kitchenette oven.

He learned the “toasting” trick while eavesdropping on a couple of tax accountants. They were chatting over their power breakfasts of egg white omelets and pom juice at a yuppie café where preteen Sammy was studying one Saturday morning. The bean counters were comparing their clients’ more creative scams for submitting fake receipts during federal audits: *How To Con The Internal Revenue Service 101.*

The forgeries, along with a sheaf of papers nicknamed “Future Sam,” were safeguarded in an oversized document envelope woven from raw silk, sealed with a locking device of rose gold, and warded with Hindu inscriptions that were coupled with a minor protection spell. The spell consisted of a combination of lines from a Hebraic blessing and a Aramaic prayer and a stovetop formula for incense (smelling like a well-loved Julia Child recipe for gingerbread cookies), which smoldered in an ornate brass bowl while the sacred text was chanted.

Integrating magical artistry from different cultures is tricky—some combinations will cancel each other out—but most supernatural mash-ups enhance the power of the overlapping enchantments. Also, applying layers made from nonrelated languages and spellwork can serve as a diversion. If the gold lock suggests Hindu Lore, that fact can delay unraveling the accompanying Hebraic prayer by days, even if the thief knows what he or she is doing.

Without the right words to unlock the spell, the envelope looked like a silk dresser scarf with an intricately crocheted fringe and an attached decorative charm, the kind of modest treasure that your grandmother might have brought over from the old country while fleeing yet another war.

Sam’s dreams were well hidden.

The silk envelope/scarf was protected against the elements (and casual inspection) by a mundane-looking plastic freezer bag. It hid in the shallow false bottom the youngest Winchester had sewn into his duffel bag during one long, humid summer evening in rural Indiana. Father John and older brother Dean had deserted him in a motel room with a rattling air conditioner that wheezed and puffed at intervals. At a bar off the nearby highway they went to interview locals regarding black dog sightings. John was drinking heavier than usual, and underage Dean was along to drive him back to the motel when he passed out. Although Sam puppy-eyed his family and begged to be allowed to come, he knew they’d turn him down. Was grateful for time alone.

Envelope, lock, and spell were gifts from a reluctant Bobby Singer to an 11-year-old Sammy after he complained about kids stealing stuff from his locker at his latest middle school.
(One overlooked facet of the boy’s genius was his ability to know what people expected of him. Sammy, like the magical silk envelope, was good at camouflage. He manipulated conflicting perceptions of who he was, a deflection from the True Sammy, even when it came to his family.)

Actually, no one bothered the younger Hunter much. He had told the lie to ensure Bobby’s assistance. He confessed a couple of years later, as a prelude to softening the old Hunter up before asking for his support for his long game. Bobby squeezed his shoulder and told him he already knew about the lie, but he was glad that Sammy spoke up. It was then that the boy recruited Bobby into helping him with his master plan to get into law school, which initiated years of deceit.

Sam never felt any guilt lying to his brother and father, just regret for the pain it would cause them and fear of losing Dean forever. Regret and fear were not enough for him to veer from his chosen path.

The truth was that his classmates tended to ignore him—as the new kid he was invisible to most people. Schoolyard bullies, however, learned that he wasn’t as helpless as he seemed. Attacking Sammy was bad luck. Punch him, and suddenly you’d be flat on your back, not knowing how you got there, and he’d be walking away, hunched over the pile of books he always carried. And your friends would help you stumble to the school nurse, who wanted to know how you managed to trip and acquire a black eye AND a sprained wrist AND ugly bruises on the back of your legs, concurrently and spontaneously.

And, of course, there was Sammy’s older brother Dean, who was rumored to have been in a secret juvenile Special Forces unit, or was a young-looking undercover cop, or just out of prison, because anyone (singular or plural) who tried anything seriously hurtful against Sammy, regardless of how many of them there were and how big and how mean, would predictably end up in the emergency room of the town’s hospital at 2 a.m., sobbing to a puzzled physician’s assistant that they were very sorry and would never try to hurt Sammy again. Or anyone else. Ever.

Lives changed in those late night bedside confessionals, while long ugly knife wounds were stitched up, somehow acquired by falling down on the football field. At midnight. Alone. No witnesses.

And if you happened to be the kind of adult who liked Sammy in the wrong way…

Say you pushed the boy with the hazel eyes and sweet mouth and worn tennis shoes against your desk and muttered promises of cash and threats of expulsion into the peach and vanilla shell of his ear. Told him you would see him tomorrow, after school. And not to tell anyone. And who would believe him, anyway. Just another stray.

That night, Sam’s older brother Dean, would Visit. You’d wake up from nightmares regarding the Visit years later. (Never figured out how he learned where you lived. Or how he ended up in your bedroom at 2 am.)

The things he said. The things he showed you, like the Visigoth scalping knife he claimed had been given to him by his uncle. The look in his eye. Never touched you. Didn’t have to.

You’d quit your job as Vice Principal in Charge of Discipline the day after the Visit and be gone from the school by lunchtime. And you’d pack up and leave town immediately. And your next job wouldn’t be around young boys and girls. Because Dean said he’d find you if you disobeyed him. And you believed him.

You were right to believe him, you know.
Meanwhile, the cloaked envelope bulged with information. Anything suspicious was safe from the prying eyes of his family, from college brochures to information about scholarships to career day flyers from middle schools and high schools, the ones that began with “So you want to be a lawyer?”

After Sam’s 16th birthday, he had to wait three months until his father took the brothers to a state where the age for the emancipation of minors was sixteen. Then, he held off visiting the local courthouse until John and Dean left on a weeklong hunt.

Sam handed a hefty bribe to the family court judge’s clerk to fit him into a busy juvenile case calendar. The money came from a special stash that Bobby and Pastor Jim Murphy had contributed to over the years, a few dollars at a time, all earmarked for Sam’s Future.

The bills had their own concealed pocket in the silk envelope. The boy was sure he’d have willingly starved rather than touch them, but the bribe was a necessary expense, falling under the accounts payable heading of “government fees”.

Sam costumed with care for the hearing—a gray sleeveless sweater vest, a pressed, clean white shirt with sleeves that came down below his wrists, and khaki chinos with a crease—different from his everyday wardrobe of layers of plaid flannel and jeans, which were clean but permanently stained with monster offal.

By now the young hunter was among the taller boys in his high school classes and still growing. Looking like an adult helped Sam convince a sympathetic judge that he was competent enough to take care of himself. The irony wasn’t lost on him that his documenting the highlights of his life for Her Honor in those artificially aged papers (while leaving out the details of vampires and graveyard salt and burns) would be enough to set him free from John’s legal control as his father.

Didn’t have to practice or role-play beforehand. Fewer lies to memorize.

When Sam left the courthouse, he almost fainted with relief. Sat in the late summer sun on an old wooden bench in front of the war memorial in the town commons until he stopped shaking.

He was free, but now would come the hard part.

Emancipation allowed Sam to sign his application to Stanford University before the age of 17—with “Uncle” Bobby as the witness—and had upped the probability of early admission. Elite institutions of higher education love Family Drama with Happy Endings that involves Overcoming Personal Challenges.

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Sam contacted teachers and librarians who had known him, the ones he made a connection with when his father parked the boys somewhere for more than a few days.

Not surprising, everyone remembered the boy with the wistful eyes and shaggy bangs who effortlessly aced every test, answered every question correctly in class, turned in perfect homework regardless of the subject, and wrote beautiful prose in an elegant, 19th century hand. Who they kept after school so they could feed him an extra sandwich and apple before he went home. Also remembered that he was shadowed constantly by an older brother who watched him like he was a dragon-hoard’s weight of treasure.
They all were more than happy to write him reference letters.

(When he got into Stanford, he wrote them all thank-you notes. And just before he graduated, before his universe went south, he wrote to tell them all the good news about the pending law school interview and to thank them again. Because that is who Dean raised him to be.)

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Remember Sam’s confession about lying to Bobby? Once the soft-hearted grump had heard Sammy’s plan, he was in 100%. Besides believing in a better future for the boy, he hoped to rescue at least one of his surrogate sons from the Hunter’s pyre.

All of Sam’s college-related mail was sent to South Dakota. Bobby devoted a cell phone to Sam’s private affairs. He became expert at discussions with college administrators: curriculum, financial aid, housing options, and the requirements for pre-law. Recorded the conversations and took copious notes. A case that gave the old Hunter greater satisfaction than most he stumbled across.

Meanwhile, Sam created a smoke screen of fake hook-ups with pretty local girls on the road so that he had time to download encrypted files and pick up faxes sent to office supply stores. And when he needed to take his college admissions exams, he made sure he was near a convenient test site at the right time. Registered as a homeschooled student. Easy peasy.

John and Dean would have been proud of Sam’s years of skilled deceptions, if he had executed them in a different context; eventually, the knowledge of what he had accomplished, and why, would break both their hearts.
Sam and Bobby sneak off to California for his interview at Stanford, and Sam finds a new supporter. He thinks about his family and why he is leaving; maybe not for the reasons you think. Dean throws a fit and is becoming a little bit obsessed with his younger brother's safety. Dean and John still are clueless.

Bobby proves once again that he should have been Sam and Dean's "real" father. And Sam's growing up in a Hunter family turns out to be an advantage. And Bobby receives a letter that changes Sam's life forever.

Have visited the lovely Stanford campus several times and have a family member who attended, plus friends who have been students, faculty, and administrators. Again, I think Sam is almost too good at keeping under the radar; even his family does not know the genuine Sam.

If I messed up on current Stanford admission protocols, my apologies...and that's why it called fiction.

California, South Dakota, and east - 2000

The required in-person interview on campus involved Bobby inventing a potential hunt in California and enlisting the help of someone he met on a decade-old case.

Bobby drove down to the Winchester’s motel-of-the-moment south of Omaha, Nebraska. Claimed a knowledgeable civilian in California’s Bay Area had asked him to look into signs that a vampire nest was organizing in Redwood City. He told John it'd be a good training expedition for Sam and better without his big brother tagging along.

Dean yelled. It was one thing if Sam was living in a warded motel room while Dean faced death and destruction. Or for Sam to come with, so Dean could keep an eye on him. But for Little Brother to go off on a case without Dean, even with as competent a mentor as Bobby?

Dean kept yelling. John yelled back. Sam and Bobby were out the door and gone for 30 minutes before either of the remaining members of the Winchester clan noticed.

John handcuffed Dean (Really? Yeah, really.) to the motel’s lone radiator to keep the older brother from following Bobby and Sam. Dad Winchester ended up removing Baby’s battery. And a few fuses. And the carburetor. Humiliated Dean by telling him he got the idea from The Sound of Music. Dean pouted until his father called in a favor and got them into a fancy indoor gun range for a day of shooting with high-tech toys.
Dean called Sam three times a day.

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Cecilia, Bobby’s friend in Palo Alto, had seen her two teenage daughters and husband tortured and murdered by the inhabitants of a small but deadly vampire outpost in the desert outside of Palm Springs ten years before.

The two girls had been driving home from a Baptist church camp where they had been youth counselors. The fangs had specialized in living off of runaways that they picked up at interstate truck stops. They took the girls while they were filling up their car. A couple of the brood loitered behind and kidnapped the parents when they arrived two days later while retracing their daughters’ route.

Cecilia was left to live because of her movie star good looks: a thick mane of wheaten hair, creamy skin, and big, grey eyes. (She had been a high school beauty queen who moved to California from Lexington, Kentucky, seeking fame and fortune and finding true love instead.) Bobby and his cranky hunting partner Rufus Turner had shown up, as they say, in the nick of time.

Bobby kept her from committing suicide and provided her a new purpose in life, working for Child Protective Services as one of the good guys. Also taught her about the Supernatural world. The two Hunters gave her a gun and one intense, daylong lesson. Made her promise to go to the gun range twice a week: a minimum standard if she planned to use it.

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Bobby and Sam arrived in Palo Alto a week before the Stanford interview. The older Hunter had arranged for them to bunk with Cecilia. Without discussion, Bobby shared the widow’s bedroom, and Sam took the foldout couch in the living room.

The widow’s older girl would have been graduating from Stanford’s medical school that year and starting her internship. Planned for a residency in pediatrics. Always wanted to work with kids.

Cecelia had gained weight. She blamed it on the cocktails of antidepressants that allowed her to sleep, despite the persisting nightmares, and helped her crawl out of bed every day. Wore her prematurely gray hair short.

Her apartment held a few sticks of furniture, including a dining room table that served as a desk. It held an out-of-date computer, ancient monitor, and stacks of papers and files. Next to the table, against a wall, sat a stack of shelves stuffed with textbooks left over from her time studying clinical psychology and social work in grad school, which she attended at Bobby’s urging. Bare walls, except for the array of family photos that decorated her bedroom. Otherwise, it looked like she had moved in the day before.

She agreed to be a local character reference for the boy. Cecilia would have provided a reference for Lucifer himself if Bobby had asked, but he wanted her to spend time with Sam and satisfy herself that he was the real deal.

After listening to the skinny kid talk about his dreams of becoming a lawyer and devoting himself to a different version of the life of “killing monsters, saving people,” one that included a legitimate career and a dog or two, Cecilia fell in love.

She told Sam that when he got into Stanford, when, mind you, that he could consider her as his go-to for home-cooked meals, a study sanctuary away campus, etc. Whatever he needed.
Cecilia and Sam practiced his interview skills and his “why I want to become a lawyer” monologue without the monster sidebars, while Bobby honed his cooking skills and spent some quality time with the attractive widow. Mostly, they talked, and at night, he held her while she cried.

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Bobby accompanied Sam to the lovely campus—so green—and the Office of Undergraduate Admissions. People-watched while waiting for Sam.

The old Hunter felt his age. He knew that Sam would never be like those people he saw walking down the hallway, would never quite fit in. Sam had seen too much. He knew too much.

The interview went well. It occurred to Sam that learning to score 48 bull’s-eyes in a row with a gun a bit too heavy for your preteen wrists to handle (and reloading under the disparaging gaze of your dead shot brother who timed you by reading the seconds out loud off of a stopwatch he “borrowed” from the athletic department of a suburban high school where he played football for two weeks), or to lie to real police officers convincingly about where you got that bloody knife, or to hustle a pool game and extract a week’s rent from a pod of bikers four times your age, or to decapitate some species of monster that nobody could identify, and then stand over the headless body while your father and brother argue if they should burn or bury the carcass and detached head, or both, and you mostly are thinking about if you can talk them into veggie pizzas to celebrate your kill…all things considered, an interview with some older lady in a nice dress? Ain’t so hard.

Bobby and Sam said goodbye to Cecilia—she hugged and kissed them both—and headed east to Wyoming on I-80, where they had arranged to meet up with Dean and John outside of Cheyenne. Rehearsed their story of the imaginary vampire nest, because Sam’s brother and father would want to know the details.

Sam asked Bobby to stop the car northeast of Salt Lake City at a roadside café that Sam had found in an AAA travel guide at the Palo Alto Public Library. Ceremoniously, the teenager escorted Bobby into the garishly painted building and bought him a very nice lunch of ribs and garlic Texas toast garlic out of money he had won hustling dart games. Turned most of his bar wins over to Dean and John for general expenses, but the agreement was that he could keep a percentage to spend as he liked. His own money, which he earned, fair and square, discounting those puppy eyes and an adorable stutter that distracted opponents up to the point that he was crowding the target’s center with multiple hits.

“Someday,” said Sam to Bobby over a tabletop covered with plates of ribs and beans and creamy slaw and jalapeno poppers, “I’m gonna buy you the best truck, and fix up the salvage yard, and anywhere in the world you want to visit, I’ll buy the tickets. And upgrade your kitchen…and everything. Anything you want…”

Sam broke down, sniffing. Bobby choked up. The old Hunter stood up, hauled the boy to his feet, and hugged him.

“When didja get so tall, idjit?” he asked. Sam buried his head into Bobby’s shoulder, eyes shut tight.

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Sam had insisted that Bobby open the registered letter from Stanford as soon as it arrived and call him with the news instantly, day or night, good or bad. Bobby would never tell the boy that he said a heartfelt prayer to a God he didn’t believe in and had clutched the letter to his chest before cutting
the flap with a favorite, oak-handled knife blessed by Pastor Jim. When he read the words that changed Sam’s world forever, he let himself cry. Wiped his eyes and washed his face and combed and parted his hair before he called Sam, ready with his prearranged code words and cover story in case Dean or John answered.

By then, the Winchesters were in rural Pennsylvania. The older Winchesters were out scouting a cemetery for signs of ghostly mischief involving Revolutionary War-era soldiers, aroused from a long sleep by bored teenagers messing with a spirit board. Sam stayed home, ostensibly to do some historical research, which he finished in ten minutes, but mostly to pace and torture himself with fantasies of rejection and failure.

After an emotional conversation, Sam immediately called the university, stammering his thank-yous and confirming acceptance to ensure his place in the queue for student housing. Then submitted his preliminary list of preferred classes via the fax machine in the motel’s office, courtesy of the sympathetic Penn State grad student who ran the evening shift at the front desk.

Although he had snagged a full ride, there’d be fees and expenses that would have to be paid before he got to campus. Forms to fill out. Questions to answer. Bobby concocted an excuse about why Sam needed to come to Sioux Falls, asking for his help on research: Dark Forces, or pixies, or the phases of the moon. Something like that. He rambled suspiciously; John put it down to loneliness. He knew how much his friend loved the boys.

Dean insisted on going along this time; said he didn’t trust Sam to be on the road by himself, although Sam had been navigating the mysteries of the interstate bus system solo since he was twelve years old.

Dean was becoming more protective of his little brother.

Neither boy knew why.

Sam protested, but John decided it’d be a good idea for his older son to check in with Bobby this time, and he told Sam it was done and done. He gave Dean a list of supplies that he preferred they buy from Bobby face-to-face rather than rely on the not-so-friendly army surplus stores and gun shops—no need to explain to civilians or the government why they needed to replenish an arsenal—. Some of the things on the list were not available outside of the Vatican Library’s archives, the British Museum’s cellar, or Bobby Singer’s pantry.

When the brothers got to Sioux Falls the first night, Dean, now 21, headed out to the bar where he had been drinking for years under his “Dean Singer” identity. Decided it was a good time to celebrate legally coming of age and reacquaint himself with a trio of local waitresses and secretaries—best friends since the 5th grade—who took turns keeping Dean company. Was secretly disappointed when Sam didn’t bitch about being left behind.

Bobby waited until he heard the Impala rumble away and motioned Sam to his desk. Unlocked a side drawer with an ornate-looking key and muttered a few words. It popped open. The letter from Stanford lay on top.

Sam noticed tear stains on the crumpled envelope—like it had been gripped tight in someone’s fist. Never said a word.

With trembling hands, the younger Hunter tucked the acceptance letter into the magicked silk envelope. Then, he and Bobby put their heads together, reviewing the thick packet of registration documents that had arrived separately and planning how to handle the remaining tasks, both of them listening for the sound of Baby roaring back into the junk yard.
When the Impala finally pulled in front of Bobby’s house hours later, Sam stuffed the paperwork into the envelope and slid it back within the secret compartment of his duffel bag. Took a breath and grinned at Bobby. Vaulted one-handed onto the couch and turned on the television, which is where a drunk Dean found him five minutes later.

The older boy fell over the top of the couch onto his brother, who pushed him off and stalked up to their shared bedroom. Dean passed out on said couch, which was just as well, because Sam was vibrating with joy and would have told Dean everything if he had been asked to pass the remote or fetch a beer from the kitchen.

What Sam and Bobby didn’t discuss was when and how Sam eventually would break the news to his father and brother.

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Sam wanted to make his last year with his brother and father as angst free as he could. He kept his bitch-faced whining to a minimum, ate more greasy hamburgers and fewer salads, and complained less about Dean’s taste in music. Nothing radical, mind you, that would tip off his family’s spidey senses. He simply pretended to Grow Up and Grow a Pair by his father and brother’s standards. Fought with his father, but was more likely to stop and concede the point—if there was one—and walk away after a muttered apology.

And if he went off by himself to brood—and catch up on the reading for his first-year liberal arts requirements—who was to know he wasn’t reading nerd books for pleasure? Sam counted on his family’s not investigating Stanford’s freshman year prerequisites or noticing that the pile of paperbacks in Sam’s duffel bag matched the list of suggested books, one-for-one.

Chapter End Notes

I have known men and women like Cecilia who have survived horrific events and established new lives, but they were never the same.
Chapter Summary

Third-rate motels weren’t the only places the Winchesters bedded down at night. Once they figured out how to con higher ed, for Sam, in part, it was like finding his place in the world. Another contribution to the lore of How The Boys Survived On Nothing.

And a glimpse into the love the brothers found and lost and hopefully, found again. Kindness and affection, no subtext unless you squint.

And how does Dean react when Sam becomes the center of attention among their new friends?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1995 - 2001 – On the road

If you had been counting on Chuck’s narratives to provide all the facts of Hunter road life, you’d arrive at some wrong conclusions. Chuck never outright lies, of course—don’t think He can—but He couldn’t fit every detail or the majority of the hunts and monsters the Winchesters had encountered into the limited number of volumes his publisher was willing to print.

Based on the books, you might think that the boys and their father spent every night either sleeping in rundown motels or bunking with Bobby, psychic Missouri Moseley, Pastor Jim, or a few other reliable hunter friends, with occasional side trips to jails, hospitals, and insane asylums.

The books documented that, as a last resort, the Winchester family would curl up on Baby’s broad seats, John in the front, and the boys in the back. Dean curved around his younger brother’s body until Sam’s growth spurt pushed them to take turns sitting and laying down. Taking turns meant they argued until John told them to shut the fuck up, and then Dean would sit next to the left-side window as far as he could get from John’s drunken snoring, and Sam would stretch out with his head in his brother’s lap, head cushioned by a folded shirt or jacket, tucked in under an old Army-issue blanket that smelled of gun oil. If it were cold, Dean would pull on a couple of extra sweaters and drape himself in a used wool Army blanket.

He’d rest one hand on his younger brother’s head, and though neither ever spoke of it, they both knew that Sammy wouldn’t be able to sleep in the Impala without the rhythm of Dean’s fingers softly combing his hair, and Dean wouldn’t be able to sleep sitting up in the back seat until Sam’s breathing evened out into a soft, throaty purr.

In the morning, Dean would wake up first and continue to weave his fingers through his brother’s soft, sweet-smelling mop, pulling his hand away as soon as Sam showed signs of stirring. Of course, Sammy had long ago mastered the art of controlling his breathing. He’d fool Dean as long as he could.

Dean became the Impala’s prime driver just about when the brothers had grown too big to share, and they tacitly agreed to split up, Sam taking the back seat. Both brothers missed those quiet
minutes of affection: another thing they would never talk about.

Again, Chuck didn’t record everything. In reality, the Winchester family also slept on the floors of abandoned factories in Pennsylvania, off-season shepherders’ cabins in Idaho, and brand-new custom-built houses in recently foreclosed gated subdivisions in high-growth communities in Texas and Florida, usually near the Gulf of Mexico. When felony-level slipshod construction forced insurance companies to pull their protection, and families moved out en masse, salvageable homes were left to disintegrate in the heat and humidity. Short term, these orphaned tract homes and their like were palaces to the itinerant, perpetually broke Hunter family and hundreds of others.

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If you asked Sammy and Dean when they were growing up, Bobby’s and Pastor Jim’s were the two best places to find shelter; the older hunters understood and supported the younger brother’s dreams and treated both boys with the kind of unconditional love that children need to thrive. The two unofficial foster fathers were the key reason the Winchester boys did not turn out to be career criminals, at least not in the conventional sense of running anonymous civilians to ground, motivated solely by greed and sociopathy.

Sam’s third favorite “Homes on the Range” were liberal arts colleges in rural areas.

When John would dump them in a small town for several days, dormitories and rarely use campus outbuildings were a welcome substitute for crappy motels. Starting from when Dean was “sixteen passing for eighteen” to that last spring when Sam secretly was getting ready to leave for Stanford, conning a free stay at a college campus was a glimpse for Sam of what “normal” might mean.

Although Dean and Sam eventually figured out how to enjoy free rooms and meals all year round, their system worked best in mid-August, about three weeks before classes started. The campuses would be waking up after drowsy summers. With fewer regular students in residence and pared-down operations in the schools’ off-seasons, unfamiliar faces—temporary workers, faculty on shortterm contracts, and visiting families—were the norm.

Newly appointed instructors would be readying for their semester’s start, transporting precious books, framed diplomas, and favorite posters to the freshly refurbished offices. Construction drones—the human kind—would be swapping out screens for storm windows in colder climates, replacing shingles, and checking the insulation in the walls and ceilings in the older buildings before the flood of fulltime students arrived.

Cleaning crews would be scrubbing the tiles in the communal showers in the athletic building, and truckers would be carting in boxes of office supplies for the bookstore and paper goods for the cafeteria.

Graduate students and resident assistants—the student body elite—would arrive early, as well as the work-study students, assigned to the library, kitchen, grounds crew, and admin offices. They’d camp out in dorm rooms that were ready until they were assigned permanent quarters.

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In the beginning of the “con the campus” era, the brothers would pretend to be looking for colleges for Dean. (“I love working on cars, so I’m thinking about engineering. Have family in law enforcement; looking into criminal justice. How is your ROTC program?”) But there was that tipping point when Sam turned 15, and by mutual agreement, it became Sam’s quest, mostly. Sometimes Dean would, in tandem, play the returning veteran looking to spend some of his largess from Uncle Sam.
No one in the administration would have the right paperwork or identification cards available during the cheerful chaos of getting ready for the formal start of the semester; would make it that much easier to slip into the routine of college life without credentials.

The boys learned that if they were very respectful of the campus police, asked solemn questions about the history of the bell tower and the statue of the founder in front of the new student union, and knew a couple of faculty names, pulled from a copy of the college catalog or the website, the officers would smile and nod and direct them to admissions.

And wave at them when they saw them on campus later that week, dovetailed into a chattering group of students and faculty.

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Dean and Sam would ask to visit the classrooms and library, waiting until dinnertime to stand in the front lobby of the student union, looking lost. Dean’s luminous grin and Sam’s world-class dimples would win an invitation to a free dinner at the cafeteria, where the food would be damn good. And if they lucked out and the meals were prepared by local farm wives, who scoffed at the USDA menu guidelines and added fresh butter and cream to everything, from corn soup with bacon, for which Dean had experienced the equivalent of a culinary wet dream, to a homemade strawberry ice cream cake that made him weep with happiness, the meals were better than good.

Then it’d be late, and Dean would mumble about their mythical motel room two towns over. A long drive, but he had to get his little brother to bed.

No, no, a half-dozen younger faculty and older students would protest, we have plenty of space, and no one is going to care…and the brothers would be ushered into a bare dorm room, smelling of fresh paint, with new sheets and clean pillows and soft blankets, folded on the bare, new mattresses clipped to sturdy metal bed frames that did not squeak. Communal showers with a powerful system of industrial water heaters and tanks to back them up were enough to make Dean seriously consider more than once ditching the Family Business for a career in higher education.

They would salt the door and windows and hang small iron versions of the more powerful warding sigils on the walls, handy gizmos Chuck failed to mention in his books. The Winchesters and other Hunters would carry duplicate sets on trips, which would be useful for places where lines of salt wouldn’t suffice. These iron artifacts acted like high-end miniaturized speakers. Positioning at least two angled towards each other would create a triangle of protection, more stable than an easily disturbed barrier of salt grains. Four or more of the sigils situated correctly could delineate a workable six-point star impersonating the Seal of Solomon and offer as much protection as a Devil’s Trap.)

Sam would run first thing in the morning, if the weather was halfway decent, or find a weight room. Always, he met friendly people, happy to welcome him to campus and compare exercise notes, and without Dean mutely standing guard, he could indulge in a little flirting. Felt inhibited when his brother was around.

After testing the Nirvana of hot water under fire-hose pressure in the morning, they would stroll over to the cafeteria for a free breakfast, with homemade apple butter for the toast and eggs made to order and machines that dispensed infinite quantities of creamy chocolate milk.

Then, during the day, Sam would spend as much time as he could in his personal version of the Elysian Fields, aka the undergraduate library. Dean would hover nearby, flipping through magazines like Popular Mechanics, Gun Digest, and Gourmet, and browsing books related to the Lore. One would never know when some anthropology textbook or New Age fantasy novel would
contain legitimate information.

At dusk, the brothers would return to the cafeteria. By the second day, they would be gifted with a complementary meal pass and learn the routines in the food lines. Instant longtimers, they would assist the latest stream of new arrivals, cementing their legitimacy in the tribal hierarchy.

The brothers would fill their trays and stake out a table. Almost immediately, a mix of staff, faculty, and students, usually new arrivals that were not yet part of any clique, would join them. Dean would start to “Dean” the young women—couldn’t stop if he tried—but Sam would ask a question, or comment on a course being discussed, then throw out a stray fact, and the pretty anthropology teaching assistant with skin the color of butterscotch brownies and the messy cap of black curls, who had been entranced with Dean’s green eyes, suddenly would be more interested in Sam’s knowledge of long-dead and possibly mythical Euphrates Valley civilizations.

Two things happened that initial visit. Dean noticed that his chicken-fried steak with the peppered milk gravy and buttermilk biscuits was very interesting and held his attention. And Sam noticed that for the first time in his life he was the center of attention in a social gathering instead of Dean.

Sam’s youth did not seem to faze his new friends. Wunderkinder were welcome, if not revered. By the end of the first shared meal the younger Hunter would have an entourage of new older brothers and sisters who seemed to think that really smart boys, even those wearing hand-me-down-and-out clothes, were very cool. And funny. They got his puns and laughed with him.

After dinner, Sam would be sprawled on a couch in the student center lounge, discussing Lord of the Rings plot lines, and which style manual was better: Chicago or AP or MLA, and how European nations involved themselves in the American Civil War on both sides. And maybe, Bach was better than Mozart.

Dean was benched on the sidelines, a couple of tables away, watching and listening.

Chapter End Notes

I have been a college student, adjunct faculty, and, among other things, the housing director of a small liberal arts college in New England. Have eaten cafeteria meals prepared by country cooks who thought butter was a food group. Baked everything onsite. Yum.

And since there is a statute of limitations, I can confess to having hitchhiked in the day, a lot. Slept in abandoned buildings. Stole shower time and claimed a vacant dorm bed. Washed dishes for spare change. And have conned free meals and room and board from more than one college. So captured a chunk of autobiography in this chapter. Find the ugly motel on the road trope stifling. Come on, guys.

And sat in the dining room many times, watching shy, awkward, eccentric, smart, talented kids feel welcome for the first time, as kindly older students and faculty made them feel they belonged somewhere for the first time. And validated them in ways maybe their family couldn’t.

Dean loves Sam, but seeing him blossom - and maybe leave him behind - could not have been easy. If he is not Batman the Superhero Big Brother, who is he?
Chapter Summary

While Sam is wowing the academic establishment across a dozen college campuses, Dean is sad and sadder during each visit, and Sam does not know why. Meanwhile, Sam is thinking about the consequences of the Big Plan.

And one benefit of Sam’s hunting background is not being afraid of campus bullies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the road - 1999-2001

At first, hanging out on a college campus was, for Sam, as if he had come home to a place where he had been exiled from as a child, as in a fairy tale of a kidnapped prince returning to claim his throne. The things about Sam that annoyed his brother and father—the constant questioning, the spewing of random factoids not related to hunting, the need to read and read and read, the interest in classical music and foreign films and museums and mathematical theories—what made him an outsider in the hunting world was what made him feel like he belonged in a classroom and college library.

Sometimes a professor would wander by, and Sam’s new buddies would want to show the kid off. Maybe it was condescending, too much like he was the treasured dog that would roll over on command, but he didn’t care. When the pompous white-haired department chair would ask him a question to test his knowledge of, for example, the Napoleonic Wars, the exchange would be less scary, in comparison, to his dad yelling at him over a scratchy-sounding cell phone.

“Find the key, damn it, Sammy, look up the name, translate the code, we need it now.”

Sam guessed that the smug economics prof who was trying to make him stumble regarding an obscure citation related to Roman law never had to decipher a Latin translation on the fly from a Greek scroll that was crumbling in his hands, so that he could chant the right words to stave off the underworld beast that was trying to kill his brother, who lay unconscious at his feet.

Or there was that organic chemistry visiting fellow who acted surprised that the kid knew about crime lab protocols. She never had to create a test for an unknown poison milked from the tooth of a creature escaped from a Chinese folk tale, using chemicals she bought at a home and garden superstore and cheap glassware and a hot plate she picked up for pennies at a yard sale.

Sam knew how to look humble, to hem and haw, blush and smile, pick at the stitching of a t-shirt too big or too small, donning the same persona he’d wear while hustling darts, pool, chess, checkers, or a baker’s dozen of bar games. Never showing an edge of competitive spirit, acting surprised when he won.

Making sure he never revealed how easy it was for him.

One evening, at a snooty college in Ohio, the brothers were planted with a few new friends in the
lobby area of the academic library next to the topnotch coffee and snack shop. An adjunct instructor—a local attorney who picked up extra money teaching pre-law classes during weekday evenings and Saturdays—descended to answer Sam’s endless, sometimes naïve questions about the study of law. He asked the seemingly shy boy with the chestnut hair how he thought he’d fare in a real-world courtroom.

“Think you have the balls, kiddo, to deal with criminal cases, unethical opposing counsel, drunken judges, hostile media, and lying clients? Or you gonna be one of those who has the degree but can’t cut it? Nothing scary or hard for you. Maybe sticking to research in a library might suit you better.”

Dean began to rise from his overstuffed foam chair, upholstered in lime green fabric, where he was decimating his third bag of free microwave popcorn. He was preparing to show the ambulance-chasing asshole what happens when a psycho felon escapes from the prison bus and decides to carve his initials into the forehead of the defense attorney who blew his case, you know, to see if he has the balls, when the awesomeness of his little brother kicked in.

Sam was hovering at 5’11’ inches and heading north at the time. He stood up from where he had been curled deep in a retro orange version of Dean’s foam chair. Did that python-y thing where he unhinged his body and let his true self—the fearless genius with the laser-sharp focus—shine through.

“I think I will manage fine,” he said, cocking his head and staring at the lawyer as if he were a tasty morsel.

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Dean seemed happy at first during each of these soirees, but he’d become uncharacteristically silent the longer they stayed on a campus. Moody even, despite the luxury of free, all-you-could-eat, county fair, best-of-show beef stew and hot biscuits and creamed corn (with real cream) and fried chicken and sloppy joes. And yes, there was pie. Every day. Every meal. And more hot water than Dean could deplete during his morning and evening showers. Chuck Bless America.

When it came to lonely co-eds looking for their first grown-up adventures away from home, Dean limited himself to hot kisses and a few stray caresses. He didn’t want to be away from his brother very long. Seemed distracted. Concerned. Trailing after Sam in a way that older Hunters who had watched the boys grow up would have considered amusing. Even touching.

Three days in heaven, and then the brothers would move on, fed and rested. Sam, with a boost to his ego and his resolve. Dean, seeing how the students and faculty appreciated his little brother.

During these charades for a free bed and three-plus squares, Dean knew nothing of PSATs or Pell Grants or the secret compartment in Sam’s duffel bag.

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Sam’s temporary friends thought his older brother was being polite and maybe shy. He gave off an insecure blue-collar vibe. Maybe intimidated by his miracle of a certifiably genius younger brother.

Sam knew Dean was sad. Something was bothering him. There was a pattern. On campus, he wasn’t the glib Dean of roadhouses and diners, the articulate Dean of interviews with grieving widows, or the fiercely, fearless bad boy Dean exchanging quips with state police and pissed off entities.
And the longer they hung around college campuses, the sadder the older brother became. Sam guessed (wrongly) that the problem was Dean’s discomfort around “normal” people who had “normal” families. Sam decided Dean secretly yearned for “normal”.

Watching Dean dealing/not dealing with their visits to these campuses became a secret heartache for Sam. He wanted to tell Dean the truth—came very close more than once—and it was harder to keep his secrets as the months rolled on.

Sam needed Dean to come with him and be happy and safe, but seeing him withdraw each time they arrived at a new school was slowly destroying his fantasy of Dean’s traveling with him to California.

Nonetheless, Dean’s behavior made Sam more determined to deliver “normal” to his brother, if Dean would let him. One way or another.

Meanwhile, although he knew he was making the better choice, Sam also knew that he’d never be like the inhabitants of academe, would never fit in. Sam had seen too much. Sam knew too much.

He knew that he and Dean were collateral damage, permanently wounded during his father’s quest for revenge.

He knew he was a hybrid monster like the ones Dean would make up to keep him giggling on long car trips. Were-o-saur. Loch Ness vampire. Ghost banshee. Witch dog. (That one turned out to be real. Who would have guessed?) One foot in Higher Education, the other in the Hunter’s Life.

Still, he dreamed. Yes, Sam liked holding his own and more with his privileged potential classmates. (By privileged meaning they hadn’t been dragged around the country by a grief-stricken drunk with the FBI profile of a serial killer, learning to desecrate graves the way other kids bend in over a home plate scratched in the hard dirt in their backyards—with small barrel bats on their shoulders—and learn to connect with a fastball.)

Nonetheless, through it all, Dean was the constant in his life. His anchor. Sam loved that Dean was grinning with pride as Sam calmly corrected a stuffy professor regarding the preferred translation of a prayer in Aramaic or calculated a complicated math problem in his head. He loved going back to their dorm room and laughing together about the clueless civilians. Loved how Dean made sure his collar was straight and his boot knife was hidden before they left for breakfast.

Loved how Dean, despite his Steve McQueen façade, did know his way around a library and would sit next to Sam and peacefully read until they packed up to enjoy yet another amazing meal.

And loved how, once in a while, it was Dean who spoke up, with a nudge from Sam, to expound about ballistics or the folklore of ghosts in the American Midwest.

Once, during Orientation Week, when a bevy of freshmen girls, while sharing a lunch table with the brothers, told of their concerns about safety on campus. Dean went into protective mode. He herded the group outside and spent an hour teaching them some patented Winchester (and U.S. Marine Corps) ninja moves.

Three years later, one of those girls crushed the nose, broke the fingers, and smashed the instep of a would-be attacker who grabbed her after an evening seminar in the shadows next to the math building. When the police asked her where she received her training in hand-to-hand combat, she talked about the good-looking young mechanic who was helping his younger brother decide on a college.
“Mechanic, my ass,” muttered one of the cops.

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Sam kept wavering about Dean. Today, he decided it was too late for Dean to change and to make a new life with Sam away from John.

Okay, so when Sam was a rich lawyer, he could use his wealth to evolve the Robert Singer property into a permanent Dean magnet.

Buy that new truck for Bobby and clean up the salvage yard and make it a real garage, where Dean and Bobby could repair cars and toasters and washing machines. Paint the sign. Fix up the house. New plumbing, with one of those just-in-time water heaters, so the Odd Couple would never run out of hot water. Give them both real beds with soft sheets and as many pillows as they want. Both Dean and Bobby were good cooks; rip out the kitchen and replace it with workstations and restaurant-grade equipment that a professional chef would envy.

And a competition-class pool table.

And he could come visit. Lawyers take vacations.

And he wouldn’t have to worry anymore about his big brother being killed by the myriads of things that scream and go bump in the night.

What Chuck’s Winchester Lore books never got right was that Sam wasn’t only running away from The Life; his real agenda was rescuing Dean.

“My turn,” he’d say to himself, as he thought of the things he could do for the people he loved with the salary (and partnership bonuses and commissions) of a successful, big-city attorney.

He wavered again.

Maybe, for his father, if it wasn’t too late. Even if it was just a check to cover the cost of ammunition and a better class of motel.

Chapter End Notes

When teaching college, I ran into too many instructors and sadly, tenured faculty members, who not only hated their jobs (inflicting themselves on the students nonetheless) but hated students who were smarter than they were. By the way, Sam always was polite while he put the jerks in their place.

The incident with the girl is taken from the moves practiced in a series of real self-defense classes for women. And, yes, they instructed the women to be this ferocious. Dean did good.
The Guards

Chapter Summary

John heads for Canada, leaving the boys to fend for themselves in Vermont. They find a new college to scam, but they don't realize until later that they haven't fooled anyone, particularly the three elderly guards who are on the alert for fires and miscreants.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spruce Mountain, Vermont - 2001

Their final free college hustle changed everything, specifically Dean's view of the world, meaning his brother Sam.

The three Hunters landed in Vermont in the late spring around Easter break. Sam knew he had a few months left on the road with his father and brother before he’d be leaving, perhaps forever.

The weather was seesawing between sunny days and cool nights–perfect for maple sugaring. Snow banks nestled in the shade of the remaining patchworks of old-growth forests. Everything smelled wet and new.

John needed to head across the border into Canada and north of Montreal to investigate a pack of Loup Garous that had violated a century’s-old détente treaty with local Quebecois. He didn’t know how long he’d be gone; he said he was worried about a couple of texts he had received from Hunters back in Kansas, something about some witches getting together to brew up something bad. But, he told his sons to set up a base of operations and drove off, as usual leaving them too little money.

Dean discovered that the picture-perfect Green Mountain State had few roadhouses where college students with disposable income liked to cluster, desperate to lose their allowances at a pool table. And too few citizens played darts for more than candy counter money, making their games not worth Sam’s time.

Fortunately, it seemed like there was a liberal arts college in every town.

A chatty waitress at a local diner, who seemed to know secret details about every picturesque center of higher learning within two hundred miles, debriefed them after a passable breakfast of steak, eggs, and hash browns for Dean and fruit, yoghurt, and homemade wheat bread, toasted, for Sam.

Two hours, a pot of coffee, and a homemade blueberry pie later, Sam and Dean had their new destination.

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The campus of the school they targeted had been a gentlemen’s farm in the 18th century, built by the son of a wealthy English Duke; the land and buildings had been gifted to a local Methodist-run organization for a girl’s college by his great-grandson in the 1860s.
The place went co-ed and lost its religious affiliation before World War II and then became a so-called “alternative” or “experimental” college, housing not more than 500 students and featuring the holy troika of the literary, performance, and visual arts.

The college campus guards included three old friends–Freddy, Lefty, and Joe–who had grown up together in the county and who wore the same grumpy façade as did Bobby, Rufus, and John. Veterans, retired from their farm work because of arthritis, they lived with children and grandchildren and wives in town or on neighboring properties that predated the Revolutionary War. All three were products of the bedrock Vermont tradition of independence and self-reliance, hallmarks of rural New England that also helped shape American Hunter culture.

The three men, along with the other guards, took turns walking the property 24/7, mostly as a fire watch crew, but also to keep an eye out for the safety of the students in general.

They were old men, older than Bobby and Rufus, hobbling as they walked, living with the aftermath of a half century of battlefield and farm injuries. Wore faded ball caps and sage green uniforms decorated with the insignia of the college.

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Some things they'll forget to tell you in the hypothetical Young Warrior class of “What It’s Like to Grow Old”, like how you will feel at 60 and 70. It will be sort of like after a house on the west coast of North America, built in that active geological playground known as the Ring of Fire, is hit by multiple minor earthquake tremors over decades. Patches up fine each time. But the repeated traumas weaken the foundation and crack the load-bearing walls and sheet rock microscopically. Damage accumulates. As wood ages, fibers tear, and materials oxidize.

Used to be you ached only when a cold, hard rain moved through in early November. Later, it will be all the time, your body breaking down around old wounds. The pain of old injuries that healed in another lifetime will have returned to haunt you.

The shoulder cartilage that was ripped when you fell from the hayloft when you were sixteen: a week of pain and then you were fine. For fifty years.

When the jeep overturned on a gravelly hillside and you skid on your knees, ripping your jeans. The weather was freezing cold, so you didn’t feel a thing until your buddies pointed at the blood soaking the ground where you were stretched out, laughing up at the sky. Hobbled around for a few months. Your knees were shot, but not like you were playing pro ball. The ache will be permanent after a cold wet day when you help your granddaughter pack for college, and you kneel down in a cold puddle to retrieve a box that had fallen from the back of the truck. When you get up, you will hurt. Again and always. And never get better.

The through and through bullet to the upper arm that you hardly thought about for thirty years. Some military action in a contested part of the world you could never pronounce. Developed a tremor. You will try not to favor it, kept it strong by making it bear the load when carrying boxes or wielding a hammer. But it will not be the same. Never the same.

Not so different from the twilight years of the rare Hunter who lives into his or her senior years, except, in addition to bullets and falls, those Hunters feel the old bites, the ghosts of ancient spells and curses and poisons, and the edge of an Angel blade where it just grazed a bone, but a graze was enough to leave its mark in the marrow.

And, like their Hunter brethren, according to local legend, these old coots, in their day, could shoot the eyebrows off a skeeter at 100 yards. Now, cataracts and macular degeneration were creeping...
over their vision like a squall line from the north. Familiarity with their surroundings and their tools, grips shaped to their hands by years of use, compensated for failing eyes.

But they still could hit the mark most times at the typical gun range.

Hell yes, they were armed. Opportunistic drug dealers, thieves, and other itinerant miscreants with bad intentions stalked the innocent, even this far from the big cities. Some of those traveling ne’er-do-wells thought “college student” meant “easy pickings”.

But word gets out, and the bad guys learned to stay away from this campus. And the students learned to take the geezers seriously.

One of the new scholarship kids during the previous semester, a star wide receiver from a Nebraska high school, was homesick his first month and hung out with the old trio. (He had the heart of a poet and wanted to write great novels like his hero Willa Cather, capturing the soul of the pioneer Midwest in stories of small town love and sacrifice.)

The old guards were cut from the same cloth as the stepfather who had raised him in the Panhandle near Scottsbluff after his mom died of cancer while he was in the third grade.

The teen teased Joe, the oldest of the men, about his being over the hill. Challenged him to an arm wrestling bout.

Thought he’d let the old man win.

Joe nearly broke his arm.

“Milked a lot of cows,” said the old man. And flexed muscles knotted like galls on an oak tree.

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The three long timers were standing outside the all-weather hut that served as the main entry point onto the campus property. They were drinking black coffee from the bottom of the pot and getting ready for the next shift to arrive, so they could go home to hot dinners and time with their families before they hit the hay at 9 p.m. Up at 4 am. Work to do.

The campus had maintained the feel of a farm, with limited access on washboard dirt roads through fallow meadows. At this season of the year the abandoned fields were about to burst into postcard vistas of wild flowers. By the time the students returned the college would look like a piece of Heaven. Maybe prettier.

The men looked up in unison as the Impala roared into view and rolled to a soft stop by the side of the hut. The road was gated; the college took safety seriously. Dean and Sam squeezed out of Baby and stretched liked puppies after a long nap. They walked up to the silent trio. The boys had shrugged into their characters: awestruck boys from the rust belt of the Heartland, looking at colleges like they were paintings in that fancy art museum in Chicago. Doe-eyed and eager and naïve. It was dusk, close to dinnertime, and Dean was armed with a story about a missed appointment for Sam.

One of the guards clicked on the floodlights outside the hut, illuminating the immediate area in the thickening dark. While they listened to Dean tap dance through his usual charming routine, Sam stood by looking awkward and damn cute.

The men were sizing them up.
Their rheumy eyes zeroed in on the faint scars on Dean’s knuckles and the side of his neck, peeking out from above his collar, the almost invisible bulge of knives and guns under layers of clothing, and that built-in sheath where the boot knife fit snug under Sam’s jeans above his right ankle.

They knew what to look for.

The old clothes, third-hand at best, with stains and tears that did not come from spilt coffee and plowing fields at dawn.

The way they stood, with Dean edged a half step ahead of Sam. Both young men surreptitiously checking their surroundings like scouts sent to scope out enemy territory.

The guards were not unkind. They knew what it was like to be broke and on the road. They doubted the tale Dean was weaving, even as he and the younger boy proffered their driver’s licenses without being asked. Both had the same address listed in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Last name Singer.

Freddy, who had served a stint in Montpelier with the Criminal Division of the Vermont State Police, entered the hut while Lefty and Joe strolled over to Baby. Dean flipped open the hood. Their faces lit up. The two guards made appreciative noises, and they stood for a few minutes, chatting easily, while Freddy made a phone call to a friend on the job.

Dean carefully dropped the hood, and they all walked the few feet back to the hut. The first stars were blinking at them in the dark sky. The temperature was dropping, and Sam was thinking he needed another sweater.

Later that evening, Freddy recounted to his wife why he and his buddies did what they did.

“Cecil, my old compadre down in Montpelier, checked his database and made a call. The boys didn’t pop up, but the car did. Registered to the crazy Hunter who came through ten years ago when we had that string of animal mutilations. He was in town for a week and left after the attacks stopped.

“Different last names, but must be his sons. I told you about Hunters, honey. Calling them crazy is redundant. Talk to law enforcement; most think they are a myth. The ones who have run into them either love ‘em or hate ‘em. Or both. Haven’t made up my mind yet, but I have seen enough in these hills to know they ain’t liars.

“I’m sure we’d have gotten an eye full if we had ordered them boys to open up the trunk of that mean-looking set of wheels.

“Don’t think the Hunter business pays so good. They’ve had a hard life, I’m betting.

“They’re looking for a place to stay, is all. The older one’s eyes are always on the kid. Could tell he’d have died for his brother without a second thought. Soldiers. Comrades in arms. The way they looked at each other.

“Sure, they probably are thieves, but the kind who’d snatch a loaf of bread and a quart of milk. Necessities. Like the tramps when I was a youngster. If they stole from us, they needed it. Emergency supplies, like a can of beans or a bar of soap. Dad told us to look the other way.

“So… they’re staying. We are pretending to believe them, and they are pretending that we believe them. Frankly, I think we’re safer with them around. And there’s always the possibility that they’re
telling the truth about looking at schools.

“Joe got a place for them to sleep tonight. The dorm rooms are off-limits, but he’s got a plan.

“No, don’t know where their father is. Didn’t ask; they wouldn’t have told me, anyhow.

“Yes, hon, Joe’s making sure they eat.

“Yes, they did look hungry. You’d want to feed up the younger one first, all long bones and not a pinch of fat. They both have missed a few meals.”

Chapter End Notes

This college is cobbled together from impressions of a half dozen places. But, it is mostly real. I have climbed that photogenic mountain and walked through those wildflower meadows. Used to sit in the shed and flirt with the guards.

Even in the Neverland of scripted television fantasies, imagining that local law enforcement has not been comparing notes about Hunter community for decades is less believable than thinking the Monster of the Week is waiting under your bed. For real. So I imagine that a growing number of police and deputies know all about Hunters. Or are Hunters or Talismen (Think the permanent Hunter support network.) And more than a handful know the Impala.

Once again, the boys unwittingly are being helped by the kindness of strangers. Like most of us.
Joe

Chapter Summary

The boys are treated with kindness by good people, and they get to experience "happy". Sam is feeling more pressure to confront the anticipated blow-up that will happen after he tells John and Dean the truth. The brothers meet Vermont's version of Bobby, who looks after them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spruce Mountain, Vermont - 2001

Freddy left the hut and pulled Joe aside, slinging an arm over his shoulder and miming good-natured camaraderie, while he whispered in his ear. Dean and Sam had returned to the car and slid in the front seat, awaiting the verdict.

Joe used his cell phone—the one his grandkids got him for Christmas—and called his daughter to tell her he'd be having dinner at the college and then had some business to attend to. He limped back over to the Impala, nodded to his friends, and folded his lanky length into the back seat of the car, holding his breath as his sore back protested out of principle. Admired the interior while Freddy lifted the gate and Lefty waved them through.

Dean drove sedately over a narrow winding, two-lane road, actually a pay grade above a cow path, topped with a worn layer of asphalt. He stayed alert for small animals becoming active at twilight, fleeing stealthy night predators—their monsters—thinking themselves safe in the dim shadows, and for distracted scholars who could easily step in front of the Impala while pondering Deep Thoughts.

Sam opened his window wide and stuck his head out like a cheerful long-eared pup, his long hair blowing in his face. In the waning light, he admired the landscape of old, repurposed farm buildings and small houses, including several early 20th century bungalows hung with signs that indicated where academic departments were officed. The wooden structures were painted in iconic Barn Red and Adirondack Green, mimicking the homemade formulas of previous centuries. At least two of the smaller one-room stone buildings predated the farm property.

A modern one-story glass and metal structure hosted the library.

Picture another impossibly lovely Vermont photo spread, the kind that people who have never visited in person assume must be touched up in a computer or darkroom.

Joe showed Dean where to park next to the student center, which had started life as a giant milking shed, built to accommodate a big herd in a Vermont winter. He eased his way out of the car, moving slowly, pushed and pulled old joints, hands on the small of his back. Dean and Sam stood by the car, waiting respectfully, having learned patience with old Hunters dealing with the lingering pain of supernatural battle scars. Then Dean locked up Baby, and Joe guided the Winchesters through the front doors and into the spacious cafeteria.
Maybe 40 people were eating in a room big enough to seat 300. Old wooden lunch tables and chairs fashioned of warm oak. Joe led them up to the old-fashioned nickel- and brass-plated cash register at the tail end of the food line, hit a key to open the big money drawer, and pulled out two preprinted yellow paper passes.

“How long you young gentlemen plan to stay?” he asked.

“Three days?” Dean said, guessing that they would secure only the one meal and be asked to leave.

“Three days it is,” said Joe, and wrote the dates and signed his name with a flourish on each pass.

The brothers sure liked what the cooks had displayed on the serving tables that evening. Marge and Betty, sister-in-laws who married two cousins fresh out of high school, had outdone themselves, testing new recipes before the regular students came back from Easter break. Chicken potpies, bacon burgers, curried lentil soup, a Greek salad that was so much better than what cheap diners dished out, and maple ginger snaps to dress up the vanilla ice cream, homemade from cream from the family dairy down the road, as was the fresh-churned butter.

It was too early for many of the fresh vegetables grown in demonstration gardens on the edges of the campus, securely caged against Vermont’s indigenous subspecies of raccoon, which sported advanced degrees in mechanical engineering (or so the natives claimed) and remarkable dexterity and strength.

But a casserole with apples and potatoes and crushed pecans, layered with pats of butter and a fine grating of cheese, lured veggie-phobic Dean into heaping his plate after stealing a spoonful to taste-test under the tolerant eyes of the cooks.

Marge decided it was cold enough for a batch of Anadama bread, rich with molasses and cornmeal. Her version had a hint of mace. She kept thick slices warm under heat lamps and bagged them in waxed brown paper sandwich sacks for folks to take back to their rooms. Didn’t want anyone to go hungry. Later Sam would say the bread smelled like Thanksgiving at Pastor Jim’s.

A few of the diners migrated to their table, greeting Joe with enthusiasm and exchanging hellos with the brothers. As usual, they mostly were folks who would have business on campus even during breaks and between semesters: older students, work-study peons, and a small handful of younger professors. Everyone was on a first-name basis, and once they heard that both Sam and older brother Dean were interested in attending their school, they were eager to proselytize for the individualized study and hands-on approach to learning.

Yes, they were dressed in a mix of working country (pretty much indistinguishable from Hunter chic) and hippie haute couture, which kept the brothers a little on edge: too many shiny pendants and pins with designs that ripped off religious sigils from a dozen cultures. Too close to the real thing.

But everyone was smart and fun. A mix of laid-back friendly and pretty serious regarding their studies at the college, whether it be about researching the history of totalitarianism, deciding the best way to grow and cook sweet corn, or performing Klezmer music. Both Sam and Dean liked that they all cared: no one was blasé or cynical.

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The brothers learned that if their passion was poetry, or painting, or acting, or music, or movie making, they could devote themselves to their craft for four years and never come up for air.
The same was true if they wanted to spend 24/7 studying physics, or theology, or history. (Their instructors would warn them that if they were, by chance, planning to go on to graduate school, they would need to check up on the prerequisites beforehand. Their intended master’s program might require more than four years of their staring at a canvas or practicing piano.)

If they were studying architecture, the faculty would drop a hammer in their hand the first day of the semester, after a lecture about safety priorities on a construction site. If they were studying education, the instructors would place them in a classroom the first week.

And, when Dean mentioned that he was interested in cars and engineering, he was invited to stop by the campus blacksmith, who would have him banging away at hot iron on a 17th century anvil before lunch.

Sam asked about law, and one of the young faculty members spoke up.

“You can read for the law here in Vermont. Kind of like an apprenticeship program. You know, like Abraham Lincoln did. Read the law. So, you can prepare here, if you like. It can work. Otherwise, you can take your pre-law classes at the state university nearby. We have a reciprocal agreement with them.”

Sam was enthralled and asked a ton of questions. As usual, the college students and professors could tell in minutes that he was “One Of Them”. Joe and Dean listened.

Someone had gathered fiddleheads to steam and butter (of course) and passed them around as a special treat, which Sam tried and liked. Dean, who had been known to eat cold pizza while covered in graveyard ash, was horrified. Truly outraged. It didn’t help when Sam tried to coax Dean by telling him they sort of tasted like asparagus. He hated the vegetable ever since his father and Bobby had pranked him—he was ten—with a big serving and then told him he was hexed after he returned from getting ready for bed to say good night.

Dean’s reaction to the unfamiliar dish was pretty funny, and Sam knew that it was a joke he’d savor and retell for years. Once upon a time…he rehearsed in his head…once upon a time Dean the Mighty Hunter was afraid of a baby fern. Once upon a time we sat with strangers and ate one of the best meals of our lives, and everyone was kind and smart and happy. And I laughed so hard my ribs hurt, and my face hurt, and Dean was happy. 101%, down to his bedrock. Once upon a time.

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Made Joe nostalgic seeing how the boys ate. They chowed down like there might not be a reliable meal tomorrow. Like when he rescued that pair of half-grown, black-and-white tuxedo kittens he had found locked in the closet of a departing student’s room a few years before.

He took the two cats home to his family that night, as angry as he had ever been when he thought of the evil son of a bitch who had abandoned the animals to starve to death. Told his surprised family (Joe was never known to be fond of felines) that they were going to keep the cats, done and done.

Warmed up a serving of raw ground beef, just enough to sweat out some of the fat. They inhaled the meat and waited, politely, until he noticed the plates were empty. Scrambled up some eggs with a speck of Cabot cheddar. Found a tin of fancy sardines packed in olive oil and mashed them up in a bowl. Finally the cats slowed down after lapping up canned beef broth. His middle daughter, who wanted to be a veterinarian, rubbed a little butter on their front paws, which they cleaned off with slow swipes of their tongues, purring loudly. An old country trick for making a cat know it was home. Then, the kittens fell asleep, head to tail, in a laundry basket piled with clean towels.
The black-and-whites, apparently brothers, immediately took ownership of Joe’s two elderly Heinz 57 hounds, his favorite easy chair, and his side of the bed. He’d scold them and call them ingrates and panhandlers and fools as he chucked them under the chin. Named them Abbott and Costello because they made him laugh.

Great mousers, gentle with the grandkids, and totally ruthless when some half-wild stray, a big bruiser with a bastard Rottweiler lineage, decided to go after the old hounds Max and Tig while all four friends were sunning in the farm yard one Indian summer day in late October. The stray brute apparently charged, not realizing that those two sweet old dogs were their dogs.

Joe heard the blood-curdling screams of the furious cats, the rough yelps and bays of the hounds, and the barks and howls of the intruder. By the time he had grabbed his Remington 572 and headed out the kitchen door the invader already was hightailing it down the long driveway to the county road. The brother cats were calmly sitting next to their whining dogs, licking the feral Rottie-mix’s blood from their paws.

Fearless and loyal. Hunters are all alike.

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Joe wondered if buttered paws would work on the Winchester boys as he watched them plow through seconds and thirds, to the delight of the cooks and the awe of their fellow diners. Betty came by to see who was eating all her potpies, not that she was complaining. Sam asked for the secret ingredient, which turned out to be sour cream in the crust.

Dean got down on one knee and asked the plump, wrinkled, 70-year-old great-grandmother for her hand in marriage, to the applause of his fellow diners, including Joe, who turned out to be one of Betty’s cousins on her mother’s side. She readily agreed and explained that her current husband would be willing to work out a deal, but it would cost Dean a sizeable bride price, probably a new John Deere tractor and a Berkshire breeding sow. And a couple of Pekin ducks; her Wally was fond of their eggs.

Dean regretfully pleaded poverty, and the engagement was called off. He got up, kissed her cheek, and returned to his seat at the table and finished up the last pie. Betty touched her cheek and returned to the kitchen. She thought of green eyes and a boy she had not thought of for 55 years. Freckles, a big, silly smile. So sweet when they were alone. Always asked, always said “please” like touching her was a gift he was grateful for. Calloused hands. Didn’t wait for the draft. His ship went down in the Atlantic.

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Next to the door of the cafeteria was a coffee set-up with identical blue enameled graniteware coffee pots sitting on a two-burner hot plate. One pot had a key chain attached to the handle with a tag that read Coffee; the other pot was labeled Hot Water. An assortment of wrapped white and maple sugar cubes and creamer packets filled a straw basket. Alongside was a rectangular metal box stuffed with differently colored tea bags and a bowl of aseptically packaged one-serving containers of real coffee cream. A plastic honey bear sat on its own saucer.

A hand-lettered sign that read “$.50” was taped to an empty coffee can capped off with a plastic lid with a slit cut in the top.

Cheap paper travel cups with covers and thick white china cups were stacked on top of one of the plastic food trays.
“Now is the time to get a cup of coffee if you need to stay up,” said Joe, while Sam searched for herbal tea.

“All we have is the leaded stuff. The gals make a fresh pot in the morning and keep it filled until dinner. One last pot at night, and it’s kept hot for the third shift and all-nighters. By morning, it will burn a hole in your gut, but would keep you wide-eyed for a nonstop road trip to Cincinnati. Use the leftovers to clean my gun.” Dean grinned in appreciation.

Sam found a mint tea bag and fixed himself a travel cup with a long squirt of honey. Dropped four quarters in the can. Joe watched as Dean shook his head in mild frustration, took the cup out of his brother’s hand, placed it within a second cup to protect him from the steaming water, and returned it.

Sam rolled his eyes but thanked him.

The brothers and the old guard stopped by the Impala on their way out from dinner. Dean decided to follow in the car as Joe and Sam walked over to the building where they were going to be staying.

Sam was quiet for a few steps, sipping the tea, then spoke without preamble.

“Thanks,” he said to Joe. “We…we just need a place to stay. Can we pay for the food? I can wash dishes, do stuff, you know. And Dean really is a good mechanic. You saw his car.”

Good kid, thought Joe. Raised right.

“Nope,” said Joe. “Are you planning to go to college? For real?”


“Wow,” said Joe. Your brother must be proud. Your…family must be proud.”

“He doesn’t know. My father…doesn’t know. Please…don’t say anything. I won’t be telling them until right before I leave. In August.”

Sam paused.

“I just wanted to tell someone.”

Chapter End Notes

Autobiographical. Just saying.

And...thinking of all of the civilians who were available to the boys for help and support, if John had not made them feel they were alone with no one to turn to. I find the theme of "Us Against The World" wears thin after a while. And there are lots of ways to fight monsters and save people.

The brother cats...some details were changed to protect the guilty, but yes, one of the elderly guards where I was working found a momma cat and litter locked in a drawer and left to die. College student from a rich family. The guard came to me with a big box with mother and babies safely swathed in towels. He was crying and told me
usually he might drown a litter of kittens - so many - but not these. He told me defiantly he was taking them home and raising them and keeping them all, if he and his family couldn't find them good homes.

And we have had cats that made sure the neighborhood dogs knew what was what and who was in charge.

Dean and Sam remind me of stray cats who might like the excitement of battles and living on the road. But hope someone rescues them some day.
Spruce Mountain, Vermont - 2001

By the time Sam and Joe arrived at the dormitory, Dean had caught up with them. He parked where Joe pointed, in a gravel lot across the road from the building. The guard stood a discreet distance away as the boys pulled out what they needed from inside the black muscle car. As Dean bent to reach into the trunk, for an instant the old Vermonter could see the gun tucked in the young man’s waistband press against his jacket.

Joe figured that the brothers had enough armament hidden in the Impala to make a decent stand at a Supernatural Alamo. From the stories he had heard about what they had to contend with, he could understand why the younger boy was bailing.

Each brother lifted a faded green army-surplus duffel bag from out of the car. Sam held them while Dean, muttering a few words, locked up the Impala.

“Wanna say good night to your girl?” asked Sam, smirking. Dean shrugged, leaned over, and kissed the classic car on the roof.

“You be good,” he scolded Baby, then grabbed one of the bags from his brother and flashed his signature grin at the guard.

The smallest dorm on campus, reserved for freshman and their resident advisors, had once been the farm’s main barn, built to protect the prize dairy cows (and their winter feed and bedding) from the weight and depth of a New England winter and to shield them from the heat in summer. The duke had wanted *le grand geste* to make his mark in the New World, so it was much larger than the typical New England barn of the time. No expense spared.

The two hundred year old building had been remodeled decades before into two floors of dorm rooms, two beds to a room, with shared bathrooms and showers at either end of the building (women at one end, men at the other), and three sets of staircases. Fire escapes had been added, and in fat years the administration had upgraded the electrical system and plumbing, shoehorned in a new heating plant, and installed new radiators.

The hallways were softly lit with blue, low wattage emergency lighting bulbs and the red blush of the exit signs.

Joe opened up a couple of rooms. Let Sam and Dean see what they looked like, as if working through the “Show prospective students the physical plant” chapter of the student life orientation handbook.

Student lodgings were plain; three walls of drywall painted a warm cream and left blank for the
students to decorate. The floors were aged to the color of dark amber honey. In each room a large, wood-framed window dominated the outer wall, which was paneled oak. The place felt snug and homey.

However, every room was taken, waiting until their occupants returned after Easter Sunday.

Dean’s eyebrows went up when Joe told them that the dorm was co-ed. He nudged Sam and winked.

“I think of every girl on this campus like she was my daughter,” Joe deadpanned. Dean coughed and turned a rosy pink, and Sam laughed.

“When I first started working here, I thought I’d be seeing orgies every day. Consenting adults and all. But you know what happens? These kids bond, like they were a family, brothers and sisters. They might “experiment”, as they say, but they need friends, good friends, more than they need fooling around. So, yeah, they have their fun, but it’s good to see how quickly they step up and protect each other when necessary.

“When a new student shows up and tries to prey on the freshman, the others shut ‘em down pretty fast.”

Dean scoffed, but privately, Joe had him at the word family.

“Notice anything?” he asked the brothers, as they climbed the stairs to the second floor by way of the middle staircase.

Sam spoke up.

“There are two floors of dorm rooms, but this building is at least 15 feet higher. There’s a hidden third floor.”

“The attic,” said Joe. “You’re in for a treat. You boys don’t smoke, do you?”

The brothers looked at each other for confirmation and grinned.

“No sir,” they said simultaneously.

“No matches, no candles, no lighters on in here. Don’t care what you do in your spare time outside. Just don’t start a fire, okay, anywhere, okay?”

The brothers already had noticed the alarm boxes scattered at intervals throughout the building, as well as the fire extinguishers mounted on the walls and smoke detectors and sprinkler heads in the ceilings.

Once they reached the second floor, Dean and Sam followed Joe to the far end of the hallway, where the men’s plumbing was clustered: toilets, showers, and one small room with an oversized cast iron, claw-foot tub. The boys took care of business and decided to skip showers so as not to keep Joe waiting.

“You’ll have the place to yourselves in the morning. Best water pressure in the state.”

Across the hall from the bathrooms there was a set of padlocked double doors. Joe, who could have had the keys to Fort Knox and the tunnel under the White House on his key chain, unlocked them, revealing a large, walk-in closet, smelling faintly of cedar, with shelves stacked with linens.
“This will take two trips,” he said.

Inside the closet a pine pole, seven feet long with an oversized black metal hook on the end, hung from a large nail in the wall, looking like Little Bo Peep’s staff from a 19th century children’s book illustration.

Joe unhooked the pole and maneuvered it into the hallway. He pointed to the ceiling. A foot-long length of iron chain with six chunky links hung down. But if you weren’t looking for it you might not see it.

He angled the pole at Sam. Sam grabbed it with his free hand and jabbed it above his head at the chain. He caught the links on the edge of the hook, and, with a nod from Joe, pulled down carefully, not knowing what to expect.

An invisible hinged panel in the ceiling creaked as it dropped open, revealing ornate iron segments of rungs and rails, which slid together as they fell, self-assembling into a ladder stretching from ceiling to floor. The black iron tips of the rails slotted into small, metal-lined holes, flush with the floor and almost invisible.

The long pole hung from underneath the dropped ceiling panel behind the finished ladder. A thick rope worthy of a whaling ship circled a couple of times around the uppermost rungs, secured where the end was tucked in under a loop.

“Open Sesame,” said Joe, grinning.

He leaned over and clicked a mechanism on the side of the ladder about waist high.

“You can lock the whole contraption in place with this lever on the right-hand rail, the one closest to the linen closet doors, from the top or bottom,” the guard said. “Unlocks it, too, of course.”

“When you come down and are ready to leave, remove the pole, unlock the lever and give the ladder a shove. It’ll fold up on its own; wait until you hear it click into place. Don’t have to lock up the linen closet. Just put the pole away; you can grab it when you need it.”

Then, he gestured.

“Please, take off your boots,” Joe said. The brothers hesitated.

“No splinters upstairs. Promise.” He leaned his back against a wall, and, lifting his feet one at a time, untied his shoes and placed them to the side next to the open closet doors. Need good leg muscles to pull that off, thought Dean.

The boys yanked their boots off: Dean, hopping on one foot at a time to keep his balance and Sam, sitting on the floor.

Joe was surprised, expecting they would be wearing the “Roman Empire” (Ancient and Holey) under their footwear. Instead, both brothers wore thick, padded new socks, the ones that come with the fancy guarantees, like the kind professional athletes use.

Dean wiggled his toes when he noticed Joe’s stare.

“Our dad was in the Marines,” he said. “Fussy about socks and feet.”

They stuffed their boots into the open tops of their partially zipped open duffel bags and then hoisted them onto their shoulders with little effort.
Joe retrieved a high-powered military-style flashlight from the linen closet and climbed up the ladder first. Dean and Sam followed, each balancing their duffel bag with one hand as they held on to the ladder with the other. Dean went first, his Hunter radar turned up to high, but he sensed no danger.

The metal rungs were somewhat uncomfortable to walk on, what with the stocking feet and the weight of the duffel bags bearing down.

Need moccasins or house slippers or soft tennis shoes, like they used to make us wear in old school gymnasiums, thought Sam, as he climbed steadily, putting most of his weight on the balls of his snow-shoe-sized feet.

“Wow, Sammy,” Dean said when he reached the top of the ladder and stepped off onto the floor. Joe had switched on the flashlight and twisted the lens to a broad beam to light up the area around the entrance. Sam scrambled up the last few rungs, eager to see what put that note of enthusiasm in his brother’s voice.

“Wow,” said Sam when he joined his brother and the guard.

“Watch your step,” said Joe, and all three men moved away from the gaping hole in the floor, illuminated by the lighting from the hallway below. The brothers dropped their bags and stared.

What Sam and Dean saw was an enormous room, encased in wood, extending the length and breadth of the entire building. The walls were fitted panels of oak, same as in the rooms below. The nails, they would learn, were hand-wrought iron: square heads, perfectly spaced.

Overhead were rafters—rows of huge beams as if the ribcage of a whale was crafted from ancient white oak trees, the kind of timber that would have been plentiful when the barn was built.

The light from the flashlight created a maze of shadows, extending into the attic’s gloomy reaches. The floor was constructed from finished planks of maple, fine enough to have graced the mansion of an English lord.

Now it made sense why they needed to take their shoes off.

Against one wall sat several old wooden trunks, side-by-side, strapped in iron and aged black leather.

The space looked like a cathedral erected in an immense virgin forest, silent and immortal. Sam expected to see a quorum of Norse gods convening in the shadows, deciding the fate of the world.

“Hello!” shouted Dean, testing for an echo. Instead, the sound of his voice was swallowed up in the dark.

Joe looked pleased and proud.

“Not too shabby,” he said, with typical New England self-effacement.

“Not too shabby,” repeated Dean, playing along.

Chapter End Notes
The origin of this piece was remembering my days on the road, and the friendly campus guard who let me and my buddy spend the night in a version of that attic, complete with the disappearing ladder. My buddy, who tragically died in a climbing accident in the Rockies years later, said the attic was magic. He was right. And there was no dust, and it smelled sweet and clean. And we cuddled chastely under a pile of blankets, because it was winter. A tribute to buddy David.

I wanted some everyday happiness in the lives of a couple of boys. (Sorry, I will NEVER think of Dean as a grown-up. And Sam...maybe, but not yet.)

Oh, and I did live in that barn for a few months under its guise as a dorm. And yes, it was haunted.

More magic on the way. And some serious feels, good and not so good, for the brothers.
Spruce Mountain, Vermont - 2001

Two things struck Sam immediately. First was the peace. It was dead still. He thought that if he focused he could hear his brother’s heartbeat.

Second, it was clean. No dust, no debris, as if it had been thoroughly vacuumed minutes before they had arrived. No musty odor, either. A slightly spicy tinge of freshly milled wood lingered in the air.

“It smells nice,” said Sam.

“Industrial-age workmanship,” said Joe. “Airflow controls. Shuttered ducts. Everything adjusts by hand. The wood construction is 18th century, but some of the bells and whistles, like the ladder and the fancy flooring, were added later. Victorian-era metal smiths could work iron into gears and levers as fine as the wedding ring shawl my wife made for our daughter’s marriage. She learned lacework from her Irish grandmother.”

He focused the flashlight on what looked like overlapping strips of metal, encased in square frames and embedded in intervals into the walls. Coarse-meshed screens were bolted over every opening to the outside to discourage varmints.

“Keeps the air fresh. Damn things work like gills. In summer, we open them up to let out the hot air; helps the building stay cool, even before we had proper air conditioning.”

There were a few small, round skylights, portholes actually, winking at them from the roof above their heads. As their eyes began to adjust, they could see the faintest of glows from the night sky through the thick glass.

“Let’s get your bedrolls,” said Joe.

They all climbed down the ladder again.

The old guard entered the closet and raided the shelves, handing each brother a complete set of sheets, pillows, pillowcases, towels, and a couple of thick blankets. He closed the doors and huffed back up the ladder. The brothers stumbled behind him, grasping a rail as they climbed, awkwardly hugging the mass of bedding to their chests.

Now that he had reassured himself that the attic was safe, Dean brought up the rear. He watched his brother’s feet the way Joe would watch his kids’ and grandkids’ as they’d climb up the wood
rungs of their bunk beds: anticipating a fall, but not wanting to take away their independence.

Sam breathed in deeply when he emerged from the softly lit hallway and stepped back into the darkness of the attic. This time, he detected a touch of ozone. Twice more he inhaled and exhaled, then paused. Took him a moment to intuit one intriguing possible reason for the pristine condition of the attic, not discounting the expertise of the men who built the barn and installed the Industrial Era technology. He reached out to Joe, silently asking for the flashlight. Joe handed it to him. Sam worked the beam into a narrow focus and then began to scan the wooden rafters.

Dean walked up to one of the walls and signaled Sam to come closer. Joe watched appreciatively as the two young Hunters shifted from the guise of coltish boys into a focused and mature professional team, mind-melded from years of experience working in the field where silence was a necessity when stalking deadly opponents.

Sam swept a wood beam with the narrow flare from the flashlight. At first, the faint swirls and shadows on the surface of the wood looked like the natural variations of the grain. But, then the light caught an edge of an image. Sam laid the flashlight up against the wood so that its ray of light paralleled the wooden panel, aimed up towards the ceiling. The angle was perfect, casting shadows over almost invisible engravings pressed into the surface of the fine-grained wood.

Sam widened the focus of the flashlight’s lens, revealing dozens of warding sigils as the light touched nearby studs and rafters. Many he recognized, but some were unknown, and Sam itched to catalog and research them.

(When the brothers talked about it later, Dean figured the old builders had employed a set of stamping tools similar to what are used to ornament leather, but larger. The engraved sigils would have been made by tapping the wood handles gently with a hammer or mallet, hard enough for the metal discs to kiss the wood and leave an impression to create the ward but still be invisible to casual observers.

How many architects and craftsmen in the building trades in the 18th century knew about the Supernatural and used sigils to protect their creations from more than normal wear and tear? The attic could have been constructed yesterday—that’s how fresh and clean it looked and smelled.

Sam added that it’d have taken experienced Hunter-level expertise to create those stamping tools, and the investment in time and money in their construction meant they were made for more than one job.

“Masons,” said Dean.

“Men of Letters?” asked Sam.

“Nah, they’re just a legend,” said Dean.)

Neither boy had looked surprised when the familiar squiggles appeared. After inspecting them for a few minutes (Dean planned to take photos later), they turned in unison towards the guard. Dean was improvising a story to deflect Joe’s attention but, before he could speak, they heard the older man chuckle in the dark.

“Nice work, Hunters. You’re as good as they say. Let’s have a sit-down tomorrow, off the record. Get a good night sleep. See you after breakfast at the student center, say 9 a.m.? They open at 6 a.m. Oh, keep the flashlight for now.”

The brothers stood motionless, stunned into silence.
Joe smoothly navigated down the ladder with the ease borne of familiarity. After a few moments the ladder very slowly began to rise on its own, the segments pulling together into a neatly meshed stack.

“Pull this thing up would ya? It will catch; lock it from your side. And try not to fall down the hole when it’s open or trip over the ladder when it’s shut. Oh, and check in the chests. You’ll find some floor mats and sleeping bags and such.”

They could hear Joe unhitch the pole. There were whispers of sound as he walked around, picking up his shoes, replacing the pole in the closet, shutting the doors, and walking away.

Sam padded over to the opening in the floor and aimed the flashlight; Dean peered at the levers on the side of the segments of the ladder’s rails.

The mechanism slowly rose on its own. Its weight was balanced and easy to handle. Dean hauled up the ladder the rest of the way with the help of the rope. The pieces slid back together and as Dean pulled them up into the attic, the panel of wood slid shut underneath, and he heard a soft click.

That’s when they starting laughing. Would wind down, then one of them would say, imitating Joe’s Yankee twang, “Nice work, Hunters,” and they both would collapse.

“Dad’s going to have a fit,” said Sam, not knowing what his father already knew about the town.

Finally, exhausted, Dean and Sam lay side-by-side on the smooth maple floor, taking turns using the flashlight like a laser cat toy, waving it slowly across the rafters and watching the shadows shift and dance.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, Dean sees his brother as a grown-up for the first time, and maybe more.
Discoveries

Chapter Summary

Dean and Sam explore the attic, and Dean is paying attention to Sam. No sex, just a little love and appreciation. But, still clueless about the growing subtext.

Sam is more conflicted about the Big Plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spruce Mountain, Vermont - 2001

First thing after they recovered from laughing about Joe’s Hunter reveal, the brothers set up camp.

They opened the trunks, which looked like they’d have been at home in a first class parlor suite on the Titanic. The scent of cedar and mint tickled their noses. (Mint is an old-fashioned mouse repellent, Sam told Dean.)

Sam tightened the flashlight’s beam and held it above Dean’s head. He aimed it into each trunk in turn while his older brother ransacked the contents. The first two trunks were filled, as promised, with what looked like old-fashioned floor mats, the kind you could find in a school gymnasium in the fifties. They were covered in tan canvas: thick, heavy, and resilient. Took the strength of both brothers to drag them out and unfold them. Four of the mats created a king-sized foundation mattress, two deep.

Another trunk held the sleeping bags, filled with high-quality down, which were designed for winter camping. Four–doubled-up, unzipped and laid flat–became the top mattress.

The fourth trunk held the prize, a stash of silk sleeping bag liners, which were unzipped and spread side-by-side, becoming luxurious bottom sheets.

Dean tested the makeshift bed by falling backwards, arms out to his sides, as if he was making snow angels. He sunk into what felt like a thick, five-star hotel down bed topper covered in silk.

“Awesome, Sammy,” he said.

The other two trunks were filled with old papers and memorabilia from the college and the local village, going back decades.

Sam twisted the lens of the flashlight and widened the beam again, then set it on its end facing up, sending light into the rafters and against the walls. While he unfolded their blankets and sheets and made up the luxurious faux bed, Dean explored, running his fingers over the wood beams and rafters. The sigils were powerful, tickling his senses at the edge of consciousness. The average person might not have noticed.

“Don’t think we need to salt,” said Dean. Sam rolled his eyes.

Yeah, like how much salt would they need to ward the attic?
When they’d find a vacated building where they would crash for a night, they would hunt for a closet, a room, or a corner that they could fortify and ward with the portable iron sigils and salt. Big rooms always were difficult to protect. But, the engraved sigils, hidden in plain sight on the walls of the attic, would keep them as safe as the wardings in Bobby’s panic room.

Sam was on his knees, stuffing the pillows into the fresh pillowcases. Dean started to slip into Mother Hen mode. Sam sensed the shift as Dean came up behind him and laid his hands on his shoulders. Comfort and support.

Sam pretended to ignore him. He continued to shake out the linens from the closet and tuck them neatly in place. Dean stepped back and stood quietly, admiring his brother’s careful handiwork. Making the bed good for both of them. Comfort and support.

As a matter of course, Sam tugged up the denim around his right ankle and pulled his boot knife from its sheath. He laid it above his pillow next to his silver blade, which he already had retrieved from his duffel. Was it his imagination that it glowed a faint blue, like an Elven sword, in the presence of so many sigils?

Regardless of the power of the wards, he felt safer with his favorite weapons near at hand. He thought, for a fleeting moment, how he’d explain his knives to roommates at Stanford. And, he knew Dean would insist he take a gun and keep up his firing range routine, regardless of his plans to leave the life.

“I’m good,” Sam said to Dean’s unspoken question.

Dean walked over to his own duffel bag and began to rummage around, frowning. Decided they didn’t need any more wards. He pulled his Colt from his waistband and laid it above the pillow on his side of the bed. Matter of course.

Sam leaned back on his heels and looked at his work. He had noticed that the temperature in the attic was stable. No drafts, no cold spots. A touch on the cool side, but they would be comfortable.

Years ago, while sharing a bed at Pastor Jim’s, the brothers had entangled themselves in a midnight mixed martial arts match over property rights; they both were committed blanket thieves. Pastor Jim, the consummate peacemaker (and dead shot with a sniper rifle), showed them a simple secret: If you share a bed, you don’t have to share the sheets and blankets. Two brothers: two sets of bedding. Done and done.

And, if you needed a reassuring touch in the middle of the night, which both brothers would deny under oath, then overlay the sheets, quilts, etc. Means easy access to a warm shoulder and comforting arm during the aftermath of a nightmare, but either party can turn away and snuggle in their individual nest without disrupting the other’s sleep.

Without consulting Dean, Sam had lapped the sheets and blankets like Pastor Jim taught them, hoping his brother wouldn’t make any snarky remarks about chick flick moments.

Just then Sam experienced an episode of what could be called “anticipatory homesickness”, even though his “home” was ten feet away, absentmindedly whistling a broken version of *Desperado.*

*Desperado, why don’t you come to your senses?*

*You been out ridin’ fences for so long now*
Oh, you're a hard one

I know that you got your reasons

These things that are pleasin' you

Can hurt you somehow

It was one of those moments when once more Sam contemplated confessing immediately and inviting Dean to join him in Palo Alto, but like the song implied, he had little hope.

Sam unzipped his duffel all the way open. (John had taught them to pack their bags consistently so that they easily could find what they needed in the dark.) Sam slipped out of his jeans and layers of jacket, sweater, flannel, and t-shirt, stood shivering slightly in black briefs, folded each item and piled them up neatly in easy reach for the morning, then put on his version of cold-weather pajamas: sweatpants and an old, long-sleeved football t-shirt he pulled from a thrift store in Texas, representing a college bowl victory from years before. He left on those very good socks.

He didn’t notice that Dean had stopped whistling and was staring. The light from the flashlight had sculpted Sam’s body into an ancient artifact, as if the boy was hewn from the same white oak that was used to build colonial ships in the day and even the building where they stood. Thighs long and sinewy flowing up into strong hips and a slender muscled torso, broad shoulders with the promise of more. His boy Sammy standing at the threshold.

Things of inevitable rightness. An ancient knife. The Impala. The Colt. Integrity is what they call it, beauty even. It’s when you can’t imagine anything better.

Sam chiseled in shadow and light. Dean blushed and looked away. He found it difficult to catch his breath.

Chapter End Notes

There are days when I believe Desperado is a better theme for the Winchesters than Wayward Son.
Dreaming

Chapter Summary

All about love. Soulmate love. Clueless Winchester soulmate love (very frustrating for observers). No subtexting, but plenty of feels. Dean is learning that he might think he knows little brother Sammy, but he has a lot to learn about this man who other people call Sam.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spruce Mountain, Vermont - 2001

Dean was proud of his wicked smart sibling. He silently had cheered Sammy on from the sidelines during their several years of conning free room and board in the too-trusting ivy halls of academia when his brother sparred successfully with students from stable, loving, middle-class homes and with professors four times his age. (Less scary than those roadhouse bikers.) Dean liked when Sammy became Professor Sam, so eager to tell Dean and others about the bright bits and shiny pieces of the worlds that he found in his books.

These college civilians were strangers. Yet, they seemed to understand his brother better than Dean, the person who had looked after him and loved him their whole lives. He knew Sammy as his brother, but now there was this second person. Sam. This man being revealed more and more during each campus visit. This man whom Dean needed to know.

When did this happen? When was Dean demoted?

He waited until Sammy…Sam…had tucked himself into the bedding—“It’s sweet, De’, really sweet,” said his happy, drowsy brother—and then Dean undressed and put on his cold weather pajamas—après ski pants he had found in a mountain ski resort sale bin that cold week in Idaho when they were contending with a werewolf and a fleece-lined, long-sleeved shirt embroidered with the insignia of a rural police department in Maine.

Sam already turned the flashlight off, but Dean’s eyes adjusted quickly. The portholes leaked ambient light from the moonlit sky and the street lamps that illuminated the pathways between the campus buildings.

Dean snaked into the bedding, undoing on purpose some of his brother’s neat work. Sandwiched between the silk sleeping bags and the soft cotton sheets and buffered by the down filling in the sleeping bags and the fluffy wool blankets…Sam was right. It was sweet, really sweet. He turned to ask him a question, but the younger boy was snoring softly. That throaty purr.

Dean rolled back and looked up. He imagined the universe shooting cosmic energy through the thick oak walls into the sigils. Pretended he could hear the hum of 18th century gears whirring in the walls, silver and iron, securing the space.

The attic was dark and quiet. And he acknowledged that he was as sheltered from harm as he had been at Bobby’s and Pastor Jim’s as a child; those hundreds of warding sigils created a complex
net of powerful white magic, protecting the brothers from the twisted evils of the world.

Dean ran a quick inventory: Full stomach. Warm, comfy, clean bed. Unlimited hot water in the morning. Free, five-course breakfast to look forward to, if dinner was an accurate portent. And, most importantly, his brother, safe and sleeping next to him.

His thoughts were starting to drift, like a boat on a small lake at dusk when the wind changes. He stared up at the rafters, shrouded in the attic’s perpetual deep twilight.

Dean turned and looked again at his sleeping brother. Sammy looked peaceful. If he was okay, Dean’s world was right and true and on course. Sammy was his North Star.

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Dean was deep in a dream. He was barefoot, bare-chested, wearing a broken-in pair of jeans. He sat on a wooden chair on a weather-beaten porch, overlooking a yard that disappeared into a broad, green meadow, a waist-high sea of grass and wildflowers. The sun was warm.

There were tools laid out on a table in front of him, the kind a sculptor would use to shape wood—chisels and knives and gouges. And Sammy’s silver blade and his boot knife. Dean had a squared-off chunk of clear pine in one hand, and he picked up the boot knife in the other. He remembered that old line about cutting away everything that doesn’t look like your vision, and he began to shave the wood. What was being revealed was looking a lot like Sammy.

Then, Sammy appeared before him, also dressed only in jeans. His skin was summer gold, unlike Dean, who alternated between fair-and-freckled and a pink burn in summer. Sammy was smiling and trying to tell him something very important, but Dean couldn’t hear him. Then, his baby brother began to cry in barely audible hiccups, the kind you get when it feels as if you can’t draw a breath.

Dean dropped the wood and the knife and reached out to his brother. And then Sammy was gasping and crying louder. Which is when Dean woke up.

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Sam was weeping as quietly as he could. Dean rolled under the shared layers of cotton sheets and soft wool blankets and put his hand on his brother’s shoulder, repeating his name softly.

“Sam? Sammy?”

Instead of pushing away, Sam turned towards Dean and let his older brother pull him into his strong arms and against his broad chest.

“There, there,” Dean said, meaningless comfort words that his mother had chanted during his toddler years—what you say when you don’t know what’s wrong and neither does the small person you’re trying to sooth.

“Nightmare?” Dean asked. He squeezed Sammy’s arm. Dean felt his brother nod into his shoulder.

“Can you describe it to me, yet?”

Sammy was trembling, but his breathing had steadied.

“Take all the time you need,” said Dean. He fell into his official-with-a-pencil role: calm, kind, someone solid in a scary world, a good listener, taking notes as witnesses try to find words for
things that were unspeakable. Paying attention to what they say and don’t say, how they say it, how they look, gently coaxing them to recall what they forgot or don’t know they know.

Hunters take nightmares seriously. Bad dreams plague all humans, but civilians are less likely to have to contend with harbingers and possessions and foreshadowings and stalkings, invading the minds of those who deal with the Supernatural, and eventually, predictably, manifesting as corporeal in the dark corners of a bedroom. So, even with the blanket of sigils encompassing the attic, as thick as the stars in the Milky Way, Dean had to be sure that no Thing would get to his brother.

Sam was tempted, cradled in the warmth of his brother’s embrace. The words would have spilled out if he just opened his mouth. But he couldn’t tell him the truth. Gritted his teeth and clamped his jaw. Couldn’t tell him the details of a dream anticipating what was going to happen when he announced to his father and brother that he was moving to California. Dean was going to hate Sam for leaving him. Leaving John. Leaving the Life.

There was no bloodshed in the nightmare. No blows, no poisoned claws or dripping fangs or corrupted flesh. Just Sam drowning in the disappointment in Dean’s face. Seeing Dean shake his head and walk away to where the Impala sat, engine running. His getting in and driving away, leaving Sam alone forever. Sam fell down in the dream, slumped against a wall, and cried. Woke up crying the same tears.

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When John first began to train Dean and later Sam as Hunters, he told them that interviewing skills would be as important as learning to pack salt into shotgun cartridges or use a machete to behead a vampire. One of the key lessons was the importance of context. A Hunter might find it easy to figure out if someone was angry or fearful, sad or hurting, telling a painful truth or an easy lie, but what he or she might never know is why the person feels the way they do. Which truth? What lie?

Sam knew that he needed to invent a believable alternative to the real story behind his tears–Sam’s grief about Sam’s leaving. Because if Dean guessed the real nightmare and its meaning then Dean would realize that Sam had violated his trust and their father’s trust. For years. Had mutinied, had lied to both of them, had conspired with Bobby and strangers–had put his trust in strangers, including the American legal system–and that Sam would be gone by the end of summer.

And Sam’s telling them he did it to rescue them just as much as it was about getting out of the Hunter’s Life would mean less than nothing. In their eyes, Sam would have committed treason against the family.

So, once again, Sam lied. Told a part of the truth.

He took a breath and opened his mouth.

“I dreamt you left me forever,” said Sam.

And snuffled into Dean’s shoulder.

As Sam said the words out loud, he added silently, “I’m gonna leave you, and it’ll break my heart. Please, come with me.”

Dean gripped Sam hard, as if a demonic entity was trying to rip his brother from his arms.

“Never,” Dean said, too loudly. “Never.”
He hitched Sam closer.

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While we’re on the topic of Ubiquitous Hunter Cluelessness…what’s never occurred to either brother is the complex nature and depth of the feelings that they have had for each other: the soulmate bond, so obvious to the denizens of Heaven and Hell. And snotty motel clerks. And psychiatrists. And Bobby and Pastor Jim and Missouri, who seems, as usual, to have known what is going on in Sam’s life years before he did. John was oblivious, as parents often are. But Pamela will know, of course, when she meets the boys in the future. Ellen. Jo will know, but will pretend otherwise, rationalizing her hope in Dean’s eventually returning her feelings. And Ash will mention it to the brothers in Heaven as if it were common knowledge.

Which it was.

Half the Hunter community knew. They would as soon cut off their collective right hands as breathe a word out loud, even when alone in the shower, a sacred space for Hunters. And a thousand monsters, even if the knowledge was confined to flashes of awareness as their equivalence of souls flee to Purgatory. Final moments of revelation and clarity. Yeah, Purgatory knew.

Dozens of their school teachers knew, even if they glimpsed the brothers together only for a few minutes in a parking lot next to that beautiful black beast of a car. And those teenage girls (and boys) smitten with hazel or green eyes, dimples or freckles, floppy bangs or bowlegs, but who eventually would see the looks exchanged between the Winchester brothers and back off–jealous but wiser.

The soulmate bond isn’t just about the potential violation of U.S. state law regarding familial relationships, though at least two states seem to have loopholes of sorts. (Look ‘em up.) It’s about the intimacy of the spiritual connection. You can see how the brothers looked at each other when you look at the face of a nursing mother, of a father when his children come home from war, and Dad stumbles out onto the back deck to check the celebratory hot dogs on the grill because he realizes his eyes–dammit, his eyes–are saying too much, because he can see that expression mirrored back in the faces of his family.

Or, at airports and train stations and hospital rooms, where people are saying, “Hello, good-bye, I love you.”

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When Sam had hit puberty, he became self-conscious about touching. Soon after, the mute, affectionate sessions in the Impala ended. (It was not just about the insufficient physical space in Baby’s back seat.) Hugs occurred during rare moments, usually after an especially rough case, or ER-based reunions, or if Sam and John had fallen prey to one of the mean-spirited and hurtful verbal skirmishes that carve out the kind of deep psychic damage that only family members inflict on each other. Or, in later years, if either brother returned from the Other Side.

Once in a while there were very brief cuddles, which happened only in dark rooms, under the shared covers, after the boys had said their good nights to each other. A quick reassuring squeeze or a lingering hand. Sometimes, Dean would forget, and his hand would trace a protection symbol on Sammy’s arm or back or softly touch his hair; Sammy would shake it off and turn away.

But now, Dean wouldn’t let go of Sammy. He had missed the physical connection with his brother, of keeping his little boy safe when the lights went out. Dean held him until his arms ached, until
his brother stopped crying, and until he felt his body relax.

Sammy had settled with his head on Dean’s shoulder, tucked with his forehead pressing against the side of his face. Dean found his way to his familiar place of comfort, petting his brother’s hair, threading his fingers through and through, a rhythm that matched heartbeat and breath as he had done so many times in the back of the Impala.

They’d talk about the dream later. Why would Sam ever think Dean could leave him?

Dean loosened his grip an inch, and Sam whimpered like he had as an infant when little Dean finally would let go and lay his baby brother to rest in the dresser drawer of a motel—in a welcoming bed of folded towels, like a kitten in a basket.

The younger brother stretched and yawned, moving blindly under the weight of his grief, sinking fathoms into Dean’s arms, melting into a deep, dreamless sleep, notching his own arms and legs and body and head into the crannies and niches and nooks of his older brother’s body, until the two were one creature with two hearts, beating in tandem.

Chapter End Notes

So, Dean and Sam get to think and feel in the safety of the attic. Wonder how many other people found a safe refuge there, a temporary shelter from the stress of life. A place where important thoughts might arise, unbidden.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Dean comes up with his own Big Plan for Sammy.

Spruce Mountain, Vermont - 2001

The dial of Dean’s old Vietnam War-era Marine wristwatch, dug up at a flea market near Havelock, North Carolina, a birthday gift he bought for himself when he turned seventeen, glowed under the umbrella of sigils. Only 10 p.m.

Sam lay over Dean’s body; the brothers were pieced together like a New England stone wall, fitted perfectly without mortar or nail.

Dean wasn’t sleepy. His hand had stopped but his fingers were pressed deep in the tangle of Sammy’s hair.

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Stupid big brother teasing. Didn’t mean anything, really.

But Dean would show up to see Sammy win medals and certificates and ribbons and badges and little gold and silver pins at spelling bees and geography Olympics and math tournaments and whiz kid contests, where it seemed that his goofy brother had memorized everything about…well…everything in the K-through-12 curriculum and beyond.

Once Sammy won second place in an 8th grade science fair. Dean remembered the details because his Energizer® Bunny™ brother made him listen to his presentation a dozen times. It was “regarding cellular interactions at a molecular level within mammalian-based life forms as manifested by the electrochemical characteristics of silver, titled Why is Silver a Metabolic Poison for Select Supernatural Creatures?”

Sammy was inspired by the Hunter Poul Anderson, who had shared his historian and physicist’s interpretations of the Lore in dozens of books masked as sci-fi and fantasy. (More prolific than Chuck and a better writer, to be blunt.)

[Author’s note: Also, Anderson was one of the founders of the Society for Creative Anachronism and a major influence in the development of the Dungeons and Dragons ‘verse. Read Three Hearts and Three Lions and Operation Chaos for his science/supernatural explanations about the physics of Magic. Should be required reading for SPN fan fiction writers, in my humble opinion.]

Sammy’s teachers thought his combining hard science and fantasy was very creative, and he’d have won Best in Show if it weren’t for the eccentricity of his entry, according to spies in the principal’s office. Meaning politics in the teacher’s break room that favored local kids over the late-entry nice
but weird boy from the broken family.

Bobby drove 300 miles to attend the fair and awards ceremony and swatted Dean on the head, hard, when he started to make a crack when Sam walked up the stairs to the stage, too proud to smile. But Dean was proud, too. Just couldn’t tell Sam.

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One thing John did right as a father. (Not trying to be sarcastic; he did many things right as a drill sergeant and survivalist, and a few as a parent.) He taught Dean and Sam to anchor themselves in consistent routine and discipline, step-by-step, in order to make sense out of the chaos of their lives. Protocols. Iron the parts of a dress shirt in the right order. Organize their duffel bags (as mentioned before). Pack and unpack the trunk of the Impala efficiently. Map out a cross-country trip so as never to run out of gas in the bigger Western states, where gas stations can be few and far between on local highways. (Baby was a thirsty beast.) Write and follow a budget in order to live on less than nothing. And create written goals, set priorities, and plan a campaign of attack when you have a problem.

While his brother drooled in his arms, Dean schemed.

First up: What was Dean to do to help Sammy after he graduated from high school? Okay, review the facts. With all of the traveling, how close was Sammy to getting his diploma? It seemed like every grade school and high school he enrolled in had been impressed enough, between the faked papers John and Dean had cobbled together and with the boy himself, that the authorities kept moving him forward through the education assembly line at a decent pace.

(To simplify his application to Stanford, Sam, unbeknownst to John and Dean, had passed his GED examination when he reached sixteen, about the same time he was granted emancipation. Finagled the age waiver with the help of Bobby’s awesome forgery skills. Since then, had been going to high school just for the fun of it and to ready himself for college life. His father and brother never noticed that he never talked about graduation.)

Let’s see, Sam (Gotta practice that), he’s 17? 18? A junior? A senior? So, the kid gets that piece of paper, and then what? He can’t just drop in and out of college every four weeks. Not the same… okay, how do people with jobs that keep them on the road do it?

Sometimes, he remembered, when Dean was pretending to be the one looking for a college degree after an imaginary stint in the military, the admission office people would ask him if he took correspondence courses when he was serving or ever signed up for classes when he lived on base, if he wasn’t being deployed. They’d tell him that he could transfer the credits, in some cases. Also could test out on the basic-level classes, so he’d not be bored to tears.

Maybe, Sam can do it a semester at a time. Some podunk community college where he can excel, two hands tied behind his back, and the credits can transfer.

Means Dean needs to do some research. Hey, Dean actually was great at research. He just preferred to clean guns and flirt in bars.

Once the brothers met an older student at a campus in Oklahoma—the woman was in her mid-30s. Moved around the country for work with an oil company. Had an engineering degree from a state university with a solid reputation. She told Dean and Sammy…damn it, Sam… that she had attended maybe five or six colleges so far and was creeping up on a business degree, a few credits at a time when she could. Was never in one place more than a couple of years.
And pretty soon more programs would be available online, she said. You both could do most of the work via computer.

And there was always that “reading the law like Abraham Lincoln” thing, if it were true. Plenty of lawyers in the Hunters’ universe. Maybe find someone to help him out.

But it was more than need for a diploma. It was dawning on Dean that going to live on a campus and attend classes and spend nights studying in a college library and having conversations with other Big Brains might be his dorky brother’s heart’s desire, as compelling in its way as his father’s search for the monster that killed their mother. So, Sammy, when he graduated from high school, was going to college. Someday. And someday, maybe even law school.

And a little college like this one maybe, in a place called Spruce Mountain, Vermont? Money might be an issue, but there are scholarships. He remembered signs on the doors of offices in the student unions: Financial Aid.

Hell, they were practically throwing benjamins at us at the dinner table, Dean thought, when they got a good listen and look at Sammy.

Nice. Like a family, Joe said. People looking out after my boy. He’d eat well, that’s for sure. Put some more meat on those skinny bones. And will he ever stop growing?

And hell, looks like it might be a Hunter-friendly neighborhood. Joe would look after him, too. Would if Dean asked.

And maybe, between hunts with John, Dean thought, he could set up shop nearby. Sam might be up for some easy salt-and-burns. New England was notorious for supernatural activity, and with a little support from local LEOs, Dean could run bigger cases on his own. Hook up with some local talent. Find a historian or mythology professor or a librarian who was into the Lore. Who might find it intriguing to leave the ivory tour for the Real World once in a while. Blood and guts.

And, he thought, I could get a part-time job. Mechanic, for sure. Let them see Baby, and I would have a job. Or, hey, maybe get work on campus. Fixing things. Like to fix things. Hang out and be able to watch over Sammy…Sam myself. Not like he needs it so much anymore. Doesn’t really need me anymore. But, it’d be nice to be around him, once in a while.

Hell, maybe I could take a class or two. There’s stuff I know. Practical engineering. History. Maybe take some useful classes in Latin or chemistry. I don’t think they’d care I just have a GED.

Wow. It’d make Sammy happy to be attending college, regardless of how unhappy his leaving the Life would make Dean. And John.


Don’t remember where John was during those assemblies where Sam’s teachers gave out prizes for being smart. John never came to any school event, except a few times when Dean was playing a real sport, like baseball or football. John would sit by himself, high on a bleacher, or lean by the back fence, paper bag in hand. Sam sometimes would sit near him, ignoring the whispered comments of classmates and the veiled stares of the adults. Dean excelled at anything athletic, of course. Sam did too, but he played weird, un-American games like soccer, which didn’t count in John’s universe.

Steadily, as the years piled up, John’s drinking grew worse, and his behavior more erratic, something Dean would rarely admit to himself, one of several unpleasant truths he kept locked
down deep, even from himself.

John never appreciated Sam as Sam. Only what he could do that was part of the battles against monsters in general and one yellow-eyed bastard in particular. His skill at research, sure. More than handy with a blade, thus his superiority at darts and anything that involved throwing pointy things. Good with a gun and growing better with practice.

These days Sam’s training regime was limited to weapons. Okay, on his own, he ran every day and lifted weights when he could find the equipment. But still too small, too skinny, to be a real asset in the field, at least according to their father. Sam and Dean had not trained in physical combat in a long time, John having decided Sam had taken those skills as far as he could go. Waste of time from John’s point of view. Dean disagreed, but in recent months he’d been on too many hunting trips with John, and Sam had a new interest in girls and was spending time in the local library of the week doing homework or research.

This latest growth spurt was a little scary, to tell the truth. John might end up being surprised. Meanwhile, Dad would have a fit if he left the family. Sam and Dean were soldiers in Dad’s War.

It’s our job.

Well, Dean thought, it’s my job.

Dean decided he was going to check in with Bobby and Pastor Jim. They both loved Sammy… damn it again…Sam…and would do anything to make him happy. Explain about the colleges and Sam’s future. Come up with a plan. The three of them could handle John. Could find a way.

Then, talk to Sam. Like, really talk. All of them. The family.

Sam would be gone, Dean thought. But I could visit Sammy. I wouldn’t be dropping him off and driving away forever.

Okay, Dean had a plan. Dean, the good soldier, would get help for Sam. Convince Dad that a lawyer in the family was a good idea. Make Sam’s dreams come true.

Done and done.

Dean felt a little smug. He would be the Number One person in Sam’s life again. Looking forward to seeing the look on Sam’s face when he broke the news about his going to college.

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Dean was no longer strung taut, with his thoughts acting as guy wires to hold the universe, meaning him and Sam, together. He felt the physical shift that happens when an important decision has been made. Like the world’s bones settle back into place.
On The Road Again

Chapter Summary

Dean is happy, and Sam is not asking why. Now, they both have secrets. A long talk with Joe about the Supernatural, and John calls.

Spruce Mountain, VT and Champlain, NY - 2001

It was midnight, and Dean still was looking at the ceiling.

Sam was a weight of muscle and bone in his arms, smelling sweetly of the remains of dinner and the spicy Anadama bread and some licorice-flavored toothpaste he found in the dorm’s bathroom, left by a student on his way home for spring break. He had squeezed out a blob on his finger and rubbed his teeth with it before they had gone upstairs. A taste of normal.

(“Anise, Dean…anise. Don’t be a jerk, jerk.”)

And whatever the herby smell that was just Sam. Always Sam.

Dean was happy, happier than he had been in months. Maybe years. He now would enjoy visiting college campuses, because he had a job to do. While Sam was impressing the natives, Big Brother would be talking to financial counselors and advisors, learning everything he could about how Sam would be able to live his dream on the road. And Dean would be with him, every step. Best. Life. Ever.

“I love you, baby boy,” he whispered and brushed a kiss in Sam’s hair.

And finally fell asleep. He never guessed Sam was awake or saw or felt his fresh tears. Once again, Sam was playing a dangerous game, willing himself not to tell Dean about his imminent departure. Yet. And still clueless regarding Dean’s Big Idea.

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They woke at seven as the sun pushed through the skylights on the east side of the roof. Actually, Sam had been awake for a few minutes, but didn’t want to leave Dean’s arms. They both had shifted several times in the night, but something was holding them together. Missouri would have called it “cosmic glue.”

Sam didn’t expect Dean to wake with a noisy yawn while simultaneously rolling Sammy over the edge of their jury-rigged bed, dumping him in a tangle of bedclothes, and laughing his evilest big brother laugh. He had not woken up happy in ages. Sam jumped up, counter-attacked, and pinned Dean under a sheet. Which was when Dean realized again that the boy looming over him was a man, all muscle and long limbs, even though Dean still outweighed him and topped him by an inch or so.

When was the last time they had sparred? And maybe weight training was not just for pretty boys wanting to meet chicks at some yuppy gym.

“Bitch.”
“Jerk.”

“Move,” said Dean, “Or I’ll piss on you.” One way to save face.

They grabbed their clothes, towels, and plastic bags filled with shampoo bottles and such, lowered the ladder, and raced each other to the washrooms. Joe had not been kidding about the water pressure. Dean stood for a full five minutes beneath a pounding cascade of hot water, his head bent in prayer to the unnamed godling of Yankee plumbing. He looked up and saw Sam two showerheads away and stared. In the morning light streaming in through the bathroom windows and with the water ricocheting off his body, his younger brother looked like the boy in his dream, golden and new.

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They arrived at breakfast by eight. First, made sure their bedding was neatly folded and the duffels packed and locked back up in the Impala. Just. In. Case. Old habits. Drove back to the student center. When they walked into the cafeteria, they were greeted by name by a dozen diners, and much to Sam’s surprise, Dean smiled and waved back.

The cooks doted on them, as the previous shift had left word about the good-looking brothers with the appetites of lumberjacks. And the marriage proposal. Also heard about the genius boy with the proper manners who was scouting schools. The staff was nothing if not loyal to their institution. Buttermilk waffles, maple syrup sundaes, and thick pork chops with a side of roasted apples, onions, and potatoes had convinced more than one promising candidate to apply to the off-the-beaten-track school, with no regrets.

As Dean stuffed his face with homemade sausage patties and hash browns and buttered toast with strawberry jam, Sam picked at a pretty good bowl of fruit cocktail and a mild, Vermont version of huevo rancheros, smothered in aged cheddar. He talked with his table mates about course loads and the collaborative alliances with neighboring schools, which gave the small college connections with the resources students needed beyond what could be offered on campus, like science labs and subject matter specialists in pre-med and a dozen languages.

Their new friends drifted off to their duties and promised to meet at lunch. The boys sat nervously in the almost empty cafeteria, waiting for Joe. A small group of administrators claimed a large round table in a corner alcove—the college’s ad hoc executive meeting room—and poured over blueprints for a proposal to upgrade the campus power grid and wiring. More individual computers and devices were demanding more juice and bigger servers.

Just as Joe arrived, one of the morning cooks brought a platter of small maple cake donuts, fresh from the fryer, sprinkled with cinnamon sugar. The boys rose to their feet as the middle-aged woman with the coronet of russet braids and the blue-striped apron set down the fragrant donuts and a stack of small plates.

Something, she said with a straight face, to tide them over until lunch.

Joe watched as the boys took the dishes and thanked her, and remained standing as Joe approached.

Sam took their coffee orders while Dean and Joe served out the first round of the donuts, two to a plate.

So, they sat, and ate, silently, washing down maple goodness with fresh coffee, making a small dent in their after-breakfast snack.
And the brothers waited for Joe to speak.

“I think I met your father ten years ago,” he said. “Something was attacking local cattle, and household pets were disappearing. Locals thought it was a pack of dogs. Summer folks sometimes will let their pets run wild, and, by the end of the season, the dogs have bonded in a gang and don’t come home. But your dad thought it might be something else.”

“Actually,” said Dean. “It was dogs. Dad said that they were a vicious group, and he was afraid they might end up attacking a kid. So he took care of them; buried the bodies deep and put rocks on the mass grave.”

Joe loved dogs, but he had seen a pack of what had once been household pets rip apart a deer and its fawn, just for fun. The problem has always been the owners, who usually never see the price of their indifference.

“It isn’t always something supernatural. Sometimes, what looks like a wild animal attack, or a human murderer, or an accident, or a suicide, is just that.”


“So…Hunters,” said Joe.

About an hour into their conversation Sam realized that he had confessed his big secret to Joe the night before. He turned pale, told Joe and Dean that he had eaten too big a serving of eggs that morning, and practically ran to the bathroom. Locked the door to the stall and sat for 15 minutes, then splashed icy cold water on his face, and came back, damp and red-eyed.

Dean made a slightly inappropriate Big Brother remark and was immediately chastised by Joe, as if he were family. Made Dean feel good.

Joe never mentioned Stanford.

They talked and talked. Sam let Dean take the lead. Dean wasn’t bragging, didn’t have to. Joe mostly asked questions about how to protect and defend folks against the average New England ghost or monster. He was surprised that iron, salt, silver, and holy water would take care of most problems. Figured that half of the back porches, sheds, and barns in rural North America were unintentionally warded, given the number of iron tools hanging on the walls.

Also, was intrigued by the silver badge/silver bullet connection with law enforcement. They all laughed over the stories that Dean told a wide-eyed little brother about how the Lone Ranger and Tonto were really Hunters. Had Sammy convinced for a summer that Bobby was the Lone Ranger after Dean showed him a gross of silver bullets in a cardboard box in the old Hunter’s office.

Three hours and an empty plate of donuts later, Joe looked up at the antique clock on the wall.

“Gotta go check in and get some work done; my shift starts in 30 minutes,” said Joe. “Good talking with you boys. See you later.”

“So, Sam,” said Dean, taking a little extra care to use the grown-up version of his brother’s name, “What’s on the schedule today? Time for lunch?”

And then his cell phone rang.

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They tracked down Joe, who insisted that he would have a work-study student pack up the attic, and they should take off and find their father. They all shook hands.

When Joe said “See you later,” Sam knew he was saying good-bye and good luck.

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The brothers avoided the expressway and meandered northwest up Route 2 and eventually crossed the big lake into New York. Ended up in Champlain, waiting at a diner for John while eating a utilitarian lunch of cheeseburgers and fries for Dean and a green salad and grilled cheese for Sam. Adequate. Sam felt bad for his brother and used his best dimple artillery to score Dean an extra piece of stale apple pie. Made with flavorless canned pie filling pimped up with a squeeze of lemon and probably three tablespoons of generic pie spice. But it was pie. Pie-like. Pie-ish.

Sam was this close to pulling his brother out of the diner and driving them back to Spruce Mountain himself. The morning cooks had alerted them during breakfast to fried chicken and goulash for lunch, with fresh peas, yet another cheesy potato casserole, and strawberry shortcake for dessert. They apologized to the brothers for what was going to be a sparse menu; it was a pre-semester inventory day.

Dean was deep in mourning.

John strode in with a terse nod for his boys while Dean was mid-fork with the pie thing-y. He sat down at their table and drank two cups of coffee, black, before he spoke.

“Heading back to Kansas, no stops, you boys keep up. Dean, let Sammy take a shift driving. There’s a coven of witches gathering in Topeka; planning some weather mischief. Missouri told me that the Hunters who contacted me were in over their heads. Pastor Jim and Bobby are sending down some big white magic that they said would help.”

The brothers knew that words weather and Topeka in a single sentence meant one thing: tornado. And add witches and you got tornadoes–plural–in the Fujita Tornado Damage Scale of F5, aka Incredible Damage. (Look it up.)

Hunting and killing witches was pretty serious business, maybe the most dangerous work the average Hunter would encounter. Even demons were nervous when witches were mentioned, knowing that the Old Magicks in the hands of an Adept was as powerful as the mojo of the remaining Old World gods and the warped power of What Lies Beneath in the halls of Hell. Maybe more so.

Angels were still a myth to most Hunters, but a skilled witch, as we were to learn in later years, could make trouble even for an Archangel.

Sam could never figure out where the Natural Order of Magic came from; the Supernatural Big Bang, as it were, that empowered the rituals of chanting words and burning spices to bend the physical laws of this universe. No one, not even Missouri, knew.

“What about the Loup Garou?” ask Dean? Somehow, French-speaking werewolves seemed more exotic than the plain old American breed.

John looked pissed off as he filled the boys in, one of his teaching moments. He pulled out his journal and scribbled as he talked. Their father was not much of a diplomat when it came to negotiations with monsters. He would have happily taken out the rogue nest himself. But local Hunters had a different mindset; some of the shifters were old friends who had the bad luck to get
They lived in groups and were disciplined enough to control their urges through meditation and homeopathic remedies and lock themselves up at the full moon.

The rule-breakers were hunted down and taken care of before John got there; John interviewed the pack’s leadership, putting aside his distaste for the werewolves for the chance to learn something new. Thanked the Canadian Hunters for their hospitality and headed back south immediately.

John closed the journal, handed it to Dean, and politely asked the waitress for an extra large coffee, black, and a fried egg sandwich to go.
The Reveal

Chapter Summary

While making their way to Topeka to confront the witches, Dean tells Sam his Big Plan for Sam's future. Does not go very well.

On the road to Topeka, KS - 2001

The next 20+ hours were a blur. John decided to take the back-road, zig-zaggy diagonal route from the New York/Canadian border southwest to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, avoiding the worst of the tolls, then picking up I-70 to the south and pedal to the metal west.

They navigated the back roads of New York and Pennsylvania, through the valleys of the Adirondacks and Alleghenies. The forests were draped in the pale green bridal foliage of spring.

The young Hunters focused on deciphering their ancient paper travel maps and their father’s arcane instructions written in the margins of his journal. They didn’t listen to music, unless Dean with his psychic radio abilities could find a classic blue-collar rock station that also had a local weather and travel report. His collection of tapes stayed in their battered cardboard box.

They didn’t talk much except if it was about deciphering the map regarding an ambiguous direction to a shortcut and reporting on the unreliable fuel gauge as the Impala guzzled down to the bottom of the gas tank. Sam knew a ‘chant that would allow the car to run an extra 25 miles just on fumes, but hearsay said that if you relied on it too much it could corrode fuel lines and plug up the carburetor. So they stopped more than John liked, keeping Baby full and satisfied.

Even with Sam playing navigator, the brothers got lost every hundred miles or so, and after Rock/Paper/Scissors, which Sam won every time–Dean, as we know, will figure it out eventually–Dean would have to call John. Again.

Turn left at the blue barn on the corner three blocks past the Old Water Tower. Not the New Water Tower, damn it Dean. Read the notes. Can’t your smartass brother read them for you?

Ignore the sign at the intersection that says State Highway J South; the next one says J1 North. Turn right. Yes, I know the road says North, and you want to be heading south, eventually; the signs have been screwed up forever. Will curve around and take you south, eventually. Trust me.

State patrol says the bridge is out? What bridge? Pennsylvania is full of bridges, yes, I know. Read the notes, damn it. Okay, where are you? Really? Really? Okay, okay…first turn around and go back 20 miles to that town with the used car dealership next to the red brick church. Then, you’re going to turn north at the crossroads. Yes, I get it, makes no sense. Trust your father.

The old, worn out Winchester family truck (which did not look so old or worn out if you looked under the hood) and the Impala both had the usual wardings against detection by radar. How do you think Hunters traveled at warp speeds on public highways without being pulled aside every few hours?

Quick pit stops, coffee, and the cheapest food groups available at off-brand country gas stations.
and giant truck oases, then back on the road.

Once they hit the Interstate at the Ohio River near Wheeling, West Virginia, everyone relaxed. John called to tell them to meet at the “usual” place in Topeka, a Hunter-friendly motel on the northern outskirts of town. They knew he wouldn’t contact them again except in an emergency.

Dean and Sam celebrated when they hit I-70. Cleaned the spring-hatch bugs off Baby’s teeth and windshield, and bought their best girl a full tank of high octane. There was lemon custard pie and giant peanut butter cookies at the nearby all-night diner. Bought three slices and a paper bag of cookies to go with their coffee. Made them both a little homesick for Vermont and maple cake donuts fresh from the fryer.

The Impala surged ahead, pounding out the miles. Dean found a great superstation–“Twenty classic hits in a row, friends”–that kept them buzzing across state lines.

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It was somewhere in southern Illinois when Dean switched off a local newscast about pig futures and took a breath. Time to rip off the bandage.

Sam, still foggy-brained from a long nap, was hoping they could stop where he could scrub the travel crud off his face and maybe, maybe, buy a banana or apple. He turned to look at Dean and caught his attention.

“I know your secret,” Dean said

Sam's reaction was not what Dean expected. The teenager's mouth dropped open, and his face turned white. He inhaled sharply and scrambled backwards in his seat pressed against the passenger door, his eyes glazed and unseeing. He looked a little like a kidnap victim at the point where the drugs start wearing off.

Dean realized that given they were traveling at 90 mph in the middle of the night, and his brother seemed to be experiencing an impressive psychotic break, slowing down and finding a safe place to pull over might be the best strategy.

“Hey, Sammy, it’s okay, gonna be okay.” It could be okay if Dean knew what the hell was going on.

He dropped the Impala’s speed to an elderly maiden’s 55 mph and, as luck would have it, the interchange with I-57 was coming up, with several busy, anonymous travel centers to choose from. Dean picked the first one that popped up and eased Baby off I-70 and onto a frontage road, where he turned the car into the sprawling travel plaza and continued to the edge of the automobile lot, as far as he could get from the other cars. Only took five minutes, but for both brothers it felt like an eternity.

As soon as he stopped the car, Sam opened the door and fell on his knees out onto the gravel-packed parking lot, crouching for a moment, standing up, and bolting away. Dean scrambled out of the Impala and, before Sam’s long legs could reach escape velocity, Dean tackled his brother and face-plant him into the gravel surface, then immediately flipped him and brushed the dirt and grit away from his eyes.

Just a few dirty scratches to wash off, but Sam was crying silently, tears wetting his face, and Dean was upset for hurting his brother.

So, he yelled at him.
“What the fuck, Sammy,” he said, a statement, not a question, and pulled him to his feet. Sam stood, head down, while Dean finished swiping the remaining crumbs of gravel and dirt from his clothes and hair, like currying an old horse too sleepy to move.

Sam sniffled, but had stopped crying.

“You know?” asked Sam. “You knew? How long?”

Dean sighed.

“I sometimes ain’t the brightest bulb in the drawer, baby brother,” he said. “Took me a while.”

“Can you forgive me, De?” Sam asked in the pathetic voice of his six-year-old self, who broke his brother’s favorite toy soldier-the one with the bayonet. Dean had given him special birthday permission to play with the cheap set of plastic soldiers. And little Sammy was as careful as a six-year-old could be. Wasn’t good enough, and Dean held the broken pieces in his hands, looking devastated.

Fortunately, they were visiting Pastor Jim in Blue Earth. He materialized, or so it seemed, before their mutual crying could turn into hitting or worse, and held out his hands to receive the soldier and his broken assault weapon. Without a word, Dean dropped the pieces in the Hunter’s cupped palms.

“Watch,” said the holy man, a true Adept. (Another detail Chuck hinted at but should have elaborated on for His readers.) He muttered a few words. The pieces glowed and came together.

“Better than new,” he said, and handed the rearmed soldier back to Dean.

"How?" stuttered Dean.

"Magic," said the good man, an answer which seemed to satisfy both boys. Chuck bless the short attention span of little ones.

They forgot the incident until several years later, on the day Paster Jim explained to them his real job in the Hunter community and showed them a few tricks of the Adept's trade.

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“Forgive you?” echoed a puzzled present-day Dean.

It finally occurred to Dean that he and Sam might be talking about two different issues. But he plunged ahead, Dean-style.

“Sammy…Sam…I’ve watched and listened to you talking with those professors and college students for how many years now? I realized, finally, that you want to attend college, not just land a college degree. It’s more than the piece of paper. It’s being around people who get you. Who get Sam. And you’ll always be my kid brother, you know. But look at you. You are so smart and good.”

Head still lowered, Sam looked up at Dean through tear-filled lashes. As if Dean had just announced the end of the world. Their world.

Dean paused, his eyes burning. His mouth was dry. A lump was forming in his throat. Not good. He took a breath. He wanted Sam to believe what he was saying.
“You are smart and good. You deserve the best. So, I want to help. When you graduate from high school, we can start looking. Maybe begin with a community college in Kansas. Sort of get your feet wet. I’m pretty sure college credits can transfer. I think. And I know there are schools for people who travel, who work on the road. And…you can study on a computer, too. And maybe it won’t be fancy, sort of patched together, but I’m going to talk to Bobby and Pastor Jim. They’ll help. They think you’re the best, you know. And we’ll convince Dad, all of us. And maybe, some day, you can settle at some place like the college back in Spruce Mountain.

And…maybe…if you like…if you want…I could come visit. Maybe hang out. Hell, maybe get a job. Live in town. Or take a class; I bet your smart ass stuff can rub off on me. A little.”

Dean ran out of breath and skidded to a halt. Sam began to cry, again, head down, tears dripping onto the ground, shoulders shaking, hands to his side, open and vulnerable, breaking Dean’s heart.

Hell, Dean thought, I did a good job. So why did Sammy just burst into tears, again? And not the happy kind. As if it were a hundred years ago, when Dean was the parent and Sammy was the child, Dean stepped forward and gathered up his crying little brother and pulled him close. Held him as he had done in the attic just 24 hours before. Wrapped his arms around the boy in a loving vise.

“Talk to me, Sammy, please,” said Dean, as Sam’s sobs tapered off to wet whimpers.

With his boots on, Sam was his height. Christo, thought Dean, did his brother grow another inch since they left Vermont?

“Did I do something wrong? What did I do wrong?” asked Dean.

“No, no,” said Sam, pushing the words out between breaths. Slowly, the crying stopped.

Dean pulled away, took Sam’s hand, and led him back to the car. Sam stood next to the passenger seat door, still staring at the ground. Dean rummaged in the back seat ice chest, fished a bottle of water from its icy depths, and pulled out a roll of paper towels they bought at the last stop, 150 miles ago.

Dean channeled a plausible Mom as he wetted down sheets of paper towels with the water and carefully finished cleaning Sam’s hands and face. Removed the tears, at least for now.

“Sorry for the tackle. You’re as fast as Baby; didn’t want you to run away. Didn’t want to lose you. You gotta use your words, Sammy. If I figured wrong, and you hate what I’m proposing, you gotta tell me.”

Sam still wasn’t speaking. Dean could see his jaw working, as if he was chewing up unspoken words and swallowing them dry. Like they hurt going down.

Hunters are trained to see patterns and make connections. Was there some link between the nightmare about Dean leaving and Sam’s reaction to Dean’s reveal?

“Can we just drive?” asked Sam.

“Okay,” said Dean, tossing the wet towels and empty water bottle into a handy garbage can at the edge of the lot.

“Let me pick up a few things.”

Sam finally got in the Impala, and Dean closed the door with uncommon gentleness. He called
John, who was resting his eyes somewhere in Missouri at a rest stop and who snorted disparagingly when Dean claimed he collided with a bad gas station burrito and needed extra time to recover.

“Be quick, kiddo,” his father grunted, and hung up.

Dean slid into the Impala, which had been rumbling to itself during Sam’s meltdown. Rare that Dean would abandon the car and leave it running unattended, even for a minute, and even with his standing only a few feet away.

He drove up to the plaza’s sprawling store and left Sammy with Baby. Bought a big bagful of Sammy treats: bananas and apples and oranges and fancy, hi-tech power bars and gourmet trail mix—the kind with cashews and dried cranberries—and bottled green tea and fruit juice, and the latest copy of Scientific American. And a prepackaged clear sack filled with small boxes and bags, labeled Movie Candy Bonanza. He was sure that would make Sam smile. Got two coffees on a little tray and two warm travel pies—hot pockets filled with cherry and apple fillings.

Went back to the car, opened the passenger side door, and sat the tray on the ground. Kept talking. Handed Sam a coffee. Opened the big bag. Handed Sam a power bar and showed him what else he got. Kept talking. Laid the magazine on his lap. Stuck the bag on the floor between his long legs, and shut the door. Picked up the tray with his coffee and pies, got in the car, arranged the tray between them, stuck his coffee in the cup holder. Kept talking. Drove the Impala next to a gas pump and filled it up again. Didn’t really need to, but it was something to do. Wiped off the latest batch of night bugs from the headlights and grill and checked the fluid levels.

And then back on the Interstate. Only 400 miles to Topeka. One more tank of gas outside Columbia, Missouri. Need to pick up three 20-pound bags of salt. Five hours, maybe, at Baby’s normal highway velocity.

Not a word. Not a single word. Sam was staring out the side window, occasionally taking a sip of the coffee; the magazine and power bar perched on his lap, untouched.

Dean stopped talking.
The Calm Before The Storm

Chapter Summary

Sam and Dean call a truce of sorts, and they arrive in Topeka. The witches’ spell is growing, and the civilian world is on alert. The boys relive memories of childhood storms. John meets an interesting friend of Pastor Jim’s. Jim provides the Hunters with a powerful weapon.

Topeka, Kansas - 2001

Dean and Sam drove into greater Topeka with the sun coming up behind them, illuminating at least one supercell that was building many miles away. Even though they knew the witches were assembling nearby, given that it was late spring meant that the threatening clouds could be just business as usual in Tornado Alley.

Both brothers had stuffed The Incident away to ponder later. Right now, they were in Hunter mode, facing down monsters and protecting human lives. Personal feelings could be dealt with later.

At times like these, Sam could understand a part of what had attracted his father to the Hunt. Fear and anger cleansed the body and the mind like a strong drug, wiping out everything unrelated, focusing the will. You could work with your worst enemy during an active case and not feel a thing, as long as you both were aligned against a common foe.

Most revenge-seekers, trapped in their addiction, usually realized too late that these emotions were deadly and obsessive and tended to lead to an early grave. Or, they never cared. Burn the boats when you land so you can’t go back. The Warrior mentality. But, in small doses, this was the right drug when confronting the threat that the Hunters and their allies had to take down in the next few hours.

In some ways, the Hunter’s Life was like joining up with the French Foreign Legion, leaving your old self behind. But without the cool uniforms, as Dean had pointed out to young Sammy more than once while watching old adventure films on pirated cable at Bobby’s house.

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Lore and Science are not mutually exclusive. Disposable cell phones and warded landlines chattered with the news of the impending Dooms Day-level machinations by the evolving coven in the Wheat Belt. Meanwhile, meteorologists specifically and atmospheric scientists in general peered at the patterns appearing on computer monitors: the 20th century equivalent of crystal balls. Images were fed by satellites and ground radar and reconnaissance planes: Leave was cancelled on Air Force bases that hosted the workhorse high-altitude Lockheed U-2 plane, aka Dragon Lady.

More “Eyes in the Skies” were going to be needed.

Weather channel hosts were transiting from cheerful reports of pollen counts and sunny skies for outdoor high school graduations to the notorious broadcast “frowny face” indicating Bad Things Coming and Journalistic Sympathy.
The phrase of the day: *Meteorological anomaly.*

What the Hunter and Scientist communities saw was a textbook-perfect confluence of enormous weather fronts racing towards each other like dream lovers running across a sunlight meadow. Except for the fact that there was no evidence of the fronts’ existence 12 hours earlier. Curious.

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The Hunters closest to Topeka had already organized themselves, waiting for John as their acknowledged boots-on-the-ground leader, with a continuous and welcome stream of advice from Pastor Jim on how best to proceed against a stand of dark powers—not the same as storming a nest of fangs or djinn. The Adept had a weapon that he thought could help. He sent it down to Kansas City by a special courier, where John could be intercepted at a designated drop off and the object could be delivered directly and safely to his hands, and his hands only, guaranteed.

The courier himself was strongly warded for two reasons: to prevent detection on the part of the witches and their spies and to keep John Winchester from discovering he wasn’t human. Pastor Jim needed someone or something with more than the strength and speed and vulnerability of a human, and John’s unreasoning black and white attitude towards the Supernatural was at best a distraction.

Most Hunters were not so unreasonable, by the way.

A 200-pound, shape-shifting familiar, who held a valid Minnesota driver’s license and could turn into a totem beast that was mostly impervious to black magic was available and was dispatched with the blessing of his bonded soul mate, a white witch named Polly. She was a child prodigy in the witching world, originally from Ireland, and had emigrated to the Americas because of a vision.

Polly took pleasure in applying her healing skills in her mortal career as a battlefield nurse, starting with the American Revolution. (Never was all that fond of the British.) She went decades without a familiar. Happens, just like not every human finds true love or even a steady marriage, and still manages to live a happy and productive life.

Her familiar’s name was Maurice, and they met at a community square dance near Ashland, Wisconsin. Golden-hair and golden-eyed and muscled like one of those young man you see in semi-pornographic ads for jeans. Or cologne. Or women’s jewelry. Or high-performance automobiles. Polly’s mortal façade was still that of a tall, red-headed woman with the same green eyes as Dean Winchester. They made a striking pair.

He made his living as a notary public and courier, and sometime body guard and escort, for people who needed to protect valuables during business transactions with strangers or when local law enforcement wanted extra help with visiting dignitaries and their families. His good looks made him popular with celebrities who needed someone who did not look like muscle to accompany them to the Midwest’s version of red carpet events.

Maurice had born in a Lithuanian immigrant family in Chicago, the seventh son of a seventh son. Although they were good Catholics, they honored the old religion—Lithuania was the last European country to embrace Christianity; was sometimes called the "Last Pagan Nation of Europe". When his gift manifested itself in a family outing to a forest preserve in Wisconsin on his eleventh birthday, turning, out of fear and rage, into a clumsy but eager preteen version of a cougar cub, chasing a hungry coyote away from the old, half-blind family dog that had wandered away from their picnic table, his father knew the sympathetic priest to call. He was mentored by a local coven in basic and intermediate Magicking, got his business degree from the Jesuits at Loyola University, and learned martial arts from an academy frequented by law enforcement.
He hopes to find a witch to bond with and serve, but while he waited, he moved to Duluth after college, drawn to the wild forests that called to his blood. Heard about Pastor Jim and visited him many times. Found in him the pastoral counselor who he could confide in, and, very soon, a friend.

Polly had moved north when she decided she liked winters with snow. Loved thick sweaters and hot chocolate and ice skating. Worked at a veteran’s hospital full time. She used her skills to ward the building and the souls of the staff and patients against the corruption and incompetence and greed and indifference that plagued too many such institutions. Her nickname among the staff was Angel. Was a member of two small covens, mostly for worshipping The Mother and indulging in their potluck dinners. Also, provided counsel and advice for local hunters, once they found out about her skills with the most obscure and difficult spellwork. Had met Pastor Jim on her own, but never had run into Maurice, until they found themselves on the dance floor. When their hands touched, their bond was welded instantly, and their relationship formalized that night in a lakeside motel.

She often thought that she was drawn to the Northland and her dual career because of a family legend of an unlikely alliance between a Templar Knight and a Valkyrie. Also accounted for her natural abilities regarding the Craft and her attraction to positive Magick.

(If you haven’t noticed, most nurses are White Witches, even if they never know it in this life.)

Their neighbors knew that the beautiful golden beast that roamed the primeval forest behind the couple’s isolated cottage near Lake Superior was no danger to their families, including the smallest souls. Their children knew the friendly cougar that liked to play with their household pets was a secret to keep, a good secret. And the community knew that the presence of the witch and her feline consort meant they were safe from anything and anyone.

Polly had already called up a ring of benign enchantments around the hospital and had planned an all-day backyard party for the neighborhood; would be easier to protect people if they were all in one place.

“Everyone welcome,” she said in her emails and when activating the phone tree. Staff from the hospital and some of the ambulatory patients would be coming as well. More blessed souls in proximity to her spell-making could not hurt. The smoke from burning herbs would be masked by the delicious smells emanating from the giant grill pit Maurice had built in their back yard when they first bought the place. Her sweet, beautiful boy loved his steaks and bratwurst.

Although they lived hundreds of miles from Topeka, she was taking no chances with the lives of the human souls under her charge.

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John parked outside the Denny’s at a truck stop off of I-70. He watched as the yellow-haired kid—anyone under the age of 45 was a kid to John—dressed better than most Hunters in butterscotch-dyed leather and tailored brown linen pants, emerged from a perfectly maintained 1970 Plymouth Barracuda, black with elegant gold detailing.

John looked at the courier’s car and was lost for a moment as he flashed on a parallel universe, an alternative life, wished his boys were with him on a road trip, just him and his sons, maybe celebrating Sammy’s graduation from high school. (When would that be?) That Mary would safe in bed in their house in Lawrence, dreaming of her family and smiling in her sleep.

They could have a normal moment, being car guys, leaning over the engine block under the raised hood, drinking beers, talking to this guy they meet by chance in the parking lot about cars and
baseball and college. Showing off the Impala, side-by-side with the ‘Cuda.

Dean would be studying engineering at KSU in Manhattan, finishing up, and maybe going on to grad school in the fall, working with Bobby during the summer to earn some extra money, dating a nice girl, making plans, and Sammy would be going off to college in September. A smart kid, or so Dean kept telling him. Book smart. Maybe becoming a librarian. Or a college professor. This summer, Mary would want him home, her baby, help out at the garage, have some fun with his friends.

Maybe spend a week at Bobby’s with his brother. Raise a little hell away from Mom and Dad. Dean and Bobby would watch over him.

The boys were close. They would end up together back in Manhattan at the university. Only an hour or so from home.

John shook off the false vision of happy and greeted Pastor Jim’s courier with a nod and grunt. Took the plain brown bag and peeked inside. Did not open the sealed curse box; did not want to call attention to himself or the artifact. Jim had gone over the details with John as he traveled, talking as the Hunter drove and listened, schooling him as to how to use it, and when. John noticed there were printed instructions in the bag as well.

“Made good time,” said the courier, gesturing at the truck.

“Nice car,” said John.

“Thanks.”

They stood for a handful of heartbeats, sizing each other up. Two beasts in the forest.

“Good fortune to us all, Mr. Winchester,” said the courier, seriously, with respect.

They shook hands. No showing off hidden strengths, just sharing warmth and reassurance. Two soldiers, before going off to war.

John watched him walked away. The kid carried himself with self-confidence. Trained fighter, thought John. Glad he seems to be on our side.

The tired Hunter waited, out of habit, for the Plymouth to roar off alone, then got in his truck and drove on to Topeka, the light of a false dawn tinting the sky behind him in pink and blue.

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According to some weather forecasters, Kansas has been hit by more F5/EF5 tornadoes than anywhere in the world. Which is one way of saying that the state is a significant center for supernatural activity and/or the perfect environment for cooking up some of the most destructive forces of Nature on the planet.

Perhaps this was why the Winchester and Campbell family trees intersected at Lawrence and another reason why the Men of Letters built the bunker near Lebanon, besides its being the geographic center of the lower 48 states. Awesome ley lines, you know. And the war of Dark Witches versus Hunters and White Witches had been raging for decades, if not centuries, in the Sunflower State, even before Coronado arrived in the 16th century looking for legendary riches.

Like most Hunters the brothers obsessed about the weather. Pragmatically, it was valuable to know if a blizzard or threatening flood would slow travel or interfere with a case’s progress. Hard to get
around to interview witnesses or track down clues if an ice storm shuts down highways. On the other hand, bad weather could be evidence that someone or something was messing with primal forces.

The brothers spent hours waiting out noisy storms in crumbling motels, which offered little more than the protection of a thin-walled mobile home. Each terrain and region had its own flavor. There were the slow-moving behemoths that lumbered down from Colorado’s high country, creating 20-foot walls of water that scoured the land and reshaped cities. The lake-effect blizzards of the Great Lakes that made Dean think of giant polar bears stalking equally huge, invisible prey, wailing in high winds. They could lay down several feet of snow in less than a week.

The tail ends of hurricanes, lashing high winds and rain and hail across the swamplands of Florida and the bayous of Mississippi and Louisiana. Nor’easters destroying Atlantic coastlands as if they wielded giant machetes. The days of relentless rain that soaked the flood plains that bordered the Mississippi and Missouri and Illinois and Ohio rivers, leaving counties underwater.

Little Sammy would be terrified, especially after he learned the truth about the family business. Dean pretended not to be terrified, for Sammy’s sake. John, indifferent to the impact noisy thunderstorms might have on the emotions of small children, would leave his boys, once again, to fend for themselves while he chased his white whale across North America.

As the storms would rage overhead, or a pod of storms ripped up the landscape for miles around, the brothers might hang out in the motel lobby under the kindly eye of the overnight auditor/clerk and watch old movies on late night cable as long as the power held. They would cuddle on the lobby couch, nestled with pillows and blankets that they carried from their room.

Often as not the clerk would break out a carton of milk from the breakfast cache, pilfer a couple of packages of powdered faux hot chocolate mix, and microwave a treat for the boys. He or she would toast up cheap white bread and offer a cupful of little containers of jam and margarine, and a plastic knife. Dean would make a show of fixing sandwiches for Sammy, cutting them into quarters, and ensuring his younger brother had enough to eat before he made one for himself.

The lobby television usually was better than the grey-haired electronics that would sulk in their room. Larger for sure and better reception. Weather alerts would scroll across the bottom of the screen.

Sammy would retrieve a worn paper map from the collection in Baby’s spacious glove compartment and spread it out on the coffee table in front of the motel lobby’s couch. He would track the storm, memorizing the names of nearby counties and matching them to the names highlighted in the weather alerts. Sometimes, he would consult with the locals behind the desk in a very grown-up way, which usually tickled the clerks, who were not used to dealing with boy geniuses.

Dean would pretend to be too interested in the movie of the moment to care, while he secretly trembled after every roll of thunder. Only Sammy knew how afraid Dean was; it was one of the very few things he never teased him about.

They always had their own flashlights, bringing them comfort. And they would hang those portable iron and silver sigils, discreetly positioning them in corners around the room. However, most stormy nights they were pretty sure nothing supernatural could batter through the strength of the tempest outside.

Even as adults, the brave young Hunters found those huge storms, which spit lightning from horizon to horizon and rained down hail as big as softballs, unnerving.
Both brothers kept glancing at the western skies as they checked in and unpacked the Impala. Sam lost a coin toss and carried in the bags of salt.

They still had not spoken about what happened between them, but they were talking again. About loading up on coffee and whether the Impala needed new spark plugs and if they would need more first aid supplies, about the spells the witches would be using and why John wouldn’t work more with the White Witch community the way most other Hunters did and which Hunters would John have chosen to be part of the “A” team, facing the coven head on.

They never ever talked about what they would do if John didn’t come back.
Chapter Summary

Dean and Sam learn about the main weapon the Hunters plan to use against the coven.

Topeka, Kansas – 2001

John was waiting for them in his room, already having pinned and taped documents and photos to the walls. As usual, he had booked a double so he could use one bed to spread out the maps and files. Dean handed back the journal and travel notes that he and Sam had accumulated on the road.

The senior Winchester had rearranged the furniture so the boys sat on the edge of his bed facing him; he claimed the only chair in the room. He had moved the small end table between them, a tight squeeze for three tall men with long legs.

Connecting the dots, John and Bobby, plus a cadre of Hunters from Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado working for days, had pinpointed the location of the anticipated witch gathering, nicknamed the Black Coven, at a farmhouse near the shores of nearby Perry Lake, a US Army Corps of Engineer reservoir built in the 1960s. The raid was planned for that evening. Whether the storm forming to the west was supernatural or nature-driven, this night seemed ideal for the coven to do its worst.

And reports of the meteorological anomaly that was expanding over the Plain states, north into Canada and down into the Gulf of Mexico, did not bode well.

But first John had a new toy to show the boys. He dug around in his duffel bag on the bed next to him and pulled out a paper bag. Opened it up and lifted out a small oak curse box with black iron hinges. With it were some sheets of paper stapled together, covered with Pastor Jim’s distinctive small handwriting, like that of a medieval monk, legible and beautiful and precise.

John whispered a few words in Latin and gently opened the box. It contained a padded black satin pouch, knotted with a red silk cord. He untied the cord and carefully spilled the contents of the pouch onto a folded white bath towel on the table in front of them.

It was, at first glance, a teardrop-cut amethyst pendant as large as a robin’s egg. It hung on a long, delicate silver chain attached at the curved top with what looked like a tiny, silver, open-faced flower. But what actually held the links and almost invisible clasp anchored to the large gem was anyone’s guess.

The color was deepest purple, a crown jewel that could be imagined caressing the throat of fairy tale royalty.

Pastor Jim had acquired the piece in exchange for some valuable sigils–cast in silver–that he obtained for services rendered on a trip to the Holy Land, a biennial journey he took to worship, study, and replenish the supplies in the hidden cedar cabinet in his office.

The pendant, said John, was on loan to help him and his Hunter cohort deal with the Black Coven–extra mojo to tip the balance of power.
The boys were impressed. From another paper bag John pulled out three pairs of white cotton
gloves, the kind used to handle fine jewelry and delicate artifacts, and handed them out. Sam’s
were sized “medium” and should have fit, but John frowned as he watched his younger son
struggle with them.

He motioned Sam to return the set and handed him a different pair from the bag. “Large”, this time.
Same size as John and Dean wore. They slipped on the younger boy’s hands easily.

John looked, like really looked at Sam, at the broad shoulders and long legs. Had made up his
mind that his younger son, growing up thin and awkward—unlike his good soldier Dean—would
never make the grade in the field, and so dismissed him years ago even while he demanded his
allegiance to the cause.

What was he, six feet tall now? This was his little boy? When did he stop paying attention?

After this offensive was finished, he would have a talk with Sam. Maybe test him on his
knowledge. He was damn good at research and smart, of course. Well, Dean said so. Decent in a
fight, but not up to John’s standards, or so he thought. Maybe he needed to reconsider Sam’s place
on the team.

While John mused about his younger son, Sam reached for the pendant, and the boys discussed the
provenance like the experienced Hunters they were. They handled the piece carefully. Sam
recognized the workmanship regarding how the stone was cut and pegged the century, country,
and culture on the first try. Both brothers made some educated guesses as to where the gem itself
was mined.

They made a good team.

Dean’s face softened as he twirled the chain and held the jewel up to the light. John knew that his
older son might never admit it, but he loved beautiful things. Gingerly, he placed it back on the
white terrycloth, where it seemed to glow on its own.

“It’s a scrying tool,” said John.

The boys looked over at their father.

“But more. Better.

“It can alert for anything on a supernatural frequency in the immediate physical vicinity, like you
were scanning a room with an EMF or using it as a pendulum to pick out locations for supernatural
activity on a sensitized map. Either way, it’ll light up and be drawn towards the source, like a
magnetic pull.

“And, it can be tuned to specific types of magic, handy if you’re working with a pack of Hunters
toting a crap load of sigils, hallowed wooden stakes, etc., to a big-assed skirmish. Like spells used
by one class of witches. Or one language, like Navaho or Hebrew or Hindi or Zulu. So the jewel’s
sensitivity can be adjusted: broad bandwidth or a pinpoint focus.

“But, better, it creates a sympathetic vibration with what it connects with. Traces of magic, including
hanging sigils and painted wards and spelled objects, cursed or blessed, will glow bright but cold—
no heat to hurt the object it’s affecting. Can find hidden hex bags and jinxed objects, even if
they’re cloaked within a drawer or behind a wall, and then switch on a light inside them. Keep
them glowing long enough to find them.

“And, best, it’s also a weapon against magic. Can set the thing to erase a spell or neutralize a
specific object or everything in the immediate area. Aim it at an object or person, or set it like a smoke bomb. It could switch off the voodoo in everything in this room, good or bad.

John snapped his fingers.

“We aren’t completely sure how it’s gonna react to the storm. They're legends about it taking out an entire army of demons that were attacking one of the great mystic Kings of Ireland. And destroying forever a coven of witches that were responsible for a series of earthquakes in China; they had stationed themselves along ley lines hundreds of miles apart. King Solomon allegedly had used it to pull down a flock of djinn and the massive sand storm they had conjured.

“The way Pastor Jim got his hands on this is that the people who had it, high-society jewel thieves, didn’t know what they had. They found it with a stash of looted treasure dating from the Renaissance, in a wealthy drug trafficker’s hideaway in Buenos Aires. Looted by the Nazis, they figured.

“ Heard that the owner was dead and thought it was worth checking the place out before the family and former business associates descended. Knew where to look for hidden wealth in a villa, and how to get it out of the country fast.

“Jim found about it from a friend of an enemy of a friend. He went to France before a scheduled private auction. Traded a case filled with silver sigils, telling them that the symbols would protect them from Interpol. Did a couple of magic tricks to impress them. They knew he was the real deal.

John paused, and smiled.

“Made the phone call to alert the French police himself, after he left their hideout in the French Alps. Then called Interpol, just for the fun of it.

Sam was stunned. Dean grinned.

“Pastor Jim lied?” asked Sam.

“Yes son, thank all that is holy, he lied.”

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“We don’t want to destroy the protections we’ll be carrying, so Pastor Jim preset the frequencies, like the buttons on Baby’s radio. When we get to the coven’s house, we will activate the gem with a verbal command. It’ll verify the witches are at home by glowing. Then, we’ll be able to locate, identify, and power down their hex bags and any enchantments they are using with one kill switch.”

John picked up the pendant by its chain and raised it to eye-level, staring into its depths. It was a flawless crystal, as clear as a winter sky.

“Bobby and Pastor Jim have figured some cute tricks to protect this beauty. It’s soaked down to its bones in grace and benedictions, so it can’t be hijacked by and for evil if it should fall into the witches’ hands. Layered spells from different cultures. Meanwhile, it’ll crack open most magical protections that hide what we need to find after we take the witches out.

“It’s gonna give us an edge, that’s for sure. Probably save some of our sorry butts when we break down the door.

“So, why doesn’t Pastor Jim lend this out all the time?” asked Dean. “It could save a lot of Hunters
“Well, it’s sort of like taking a grenade launcher to a knife fight. Most of the time you just need a longer, bigger knife,” said John, winking at his sons in a rare show of fatherly teasing, which made Sam blush and Dean smirk.

“Or just show up and be the best in the room.” At that, John leaned over and messed up his younger son’s hair. Maybe facing imminent death was a good thing, thought Dean, watching Sammy duck his head, grinning. Hell, no wonder his brother wanted to go away to college. Even a “good job” from their father was as frequent as a full moon. A blue moon for the younger son.

Dean was praised for strength in a fight and skills with guns and tactical success. But Sam mostly heard how he was weak and slow and impractical. Even when another Hunter made a point of praising Sam for his research abilities or complaining with good humor when Sam beat a bar’s worth of his dad’s drinking buddies at darts at Harvelle’s Roadhouse, John would say nothing.

When the Winchesters weren’t around to hear, the Hunters talked about the boys and how John treated them. John was respected, and maybe feared, but more than one Hunter could be heard to say that they’d be proud to have both those boys as their own. And, of course, if Bobby was around, he’d never bad-mouth John–knew too much–but he would lecture the room on the virtues and valor of Dean and Sam. And if he sometimes forgot and called them “my boys” no one corrected him.

John returned to the question on the table regarding the use of the amethyst.

“But the main reason we only can use it once in a while is that once the gem’s magic lever is flipped to “on” the power drains quickly. Not forever, but it needs to recharge, by moonlight, in a special glass box carved with a Solomon’s Seal. With a fight like what we have on tap with the coven, I’d reckon it will need weeks or even months to come up to full strength again.

“Just hope it has enough energy stored up in its mojo batteries to see the job through tonight.”

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Sam was intrigued by the amethyst and its powers; he didn't have to feign interest, but he was distracted. Otherwise, he would have realized the importance of what John was saying. As it were, something itched at his brain after John left. A forgotten memory that would have consequences.

It was decided that Sam and Dean would stay behind at the motel. Another way of saying that John ordered them to stay put. No argument. Done and done. Did not make the brothers happy, but they knew it was the right thing to do strategically. In case the plan went south, they could relay information to other Hunters in the region who were acting as a back-up division. Reserve forces waited on standby 150 miles away, at the outer diameter of a potential blast zone. The auxiliaries could be onsite in 90 minutes–Hunter Drive Time–or less.

John didn’t tell his sons what exactly might blow up. He also didn’t acknowledge that this scenario left his sons at risk, unless John had planted powerful protections that would keep the motel safe, even from the supernatural equivalent of an A-bomb.

They all needed a nap. John would call them just before he was ready to leave. The boys returned to their room, salted the doors and windows, hung the portable sigils as an extra precaution, kicked their shoes off, and passed out in tandem.

The father and sons met up a few hours later. Dean dropped by the lobby of the motel with the bag...
from the travel plaza. He filled a half dozen paper coffee cups from a big coffee maker, slipped on travel lids, and placed them at the bottom of the bag, one at a time. Left a ten with the clerk. He recognized but did not acknowledge the three Hunters dressed in camo, sprawled on chairs in the breakfast room, talking about spring turkey season. As he walked out of the lobby to his father’s room he saw a couple of trucks pulling into the parking lot. Did not even nod at the drivers, who turned off their engines. And waited.

John left his final instructions. The usual caveats about Don’t Call and Don’t Be Damn Fools and Get Out While The Getting Is Good. And Don’t Call. Head up to Blue Earth or Sioux Falls if... John and Pastor Jim will tell you what to do. Or back to Lawrence if the roads aren’t clear. Missouri will take you in, and her house is as safe as anywhere on the planet.

John moved out at dusk in the family truck. An array of weapons, from guns preloaded with witch-killing cartridges to specially blessed knives with handles of oak inlaid with hazel wood to the equivalent of bulletproof vests to ward off spell attacks were piled on the spacious passenger seat next to him in easy reach, strapped in place with a net of bungee cords to keep them from become projectiles in case of sudden stops. His duffel bag lay on the floor.

The purple gemstone was back in its silk pouch inside the curse box, sitting in a bag woven of hemp along with a few specialty items. The handle was looped securely by two of the bungee cords, in easy reach.

The other Hunters had driven away, making sure to leave at random intervals and by different routes. He was meeting the team in the town of Perry, south of the manmade lake.

The onslaught of giant tornadoes that the witches planned to raise and direct through Topeka and on to Kansas City were aimed northeast to the real prize: the nine million-plus people in greater Chicagoland, which extended into Indiana and Wisconsin.

The witches could not be allowed to live.
Dean and Sam batten down the hatches, while Sam has time to think. The storm arrives in Topeka.

Topeka, KS - 2001

The boys locked up John’s motel room, filled with incriminating evidence of murder and mayhem, and returned to their double with two satisfactory queen beds. But first they brought over one of the bags of salt, poured a salt line around the entire perimeter of the room, not just in front of the door and windows, hung iron and silver sigils on the walls, and painted an exceedingly powerful Seal of Solomon image in holy oil, a variation that the psychic Missouri taught them, on the inside of the door.

Sam carefully laid down the last stroke under Dean’s watchful eye, and there was a quick flash of silver light. The image was now charred into the wood.

Wow, didn’t know that would happen.

Hell to fix, but the motel knew Hunters. The owners, a nice couple born and raised in Wichita, had a daughter, Anna, who had been snatched by an ugly-assed old vamp that wanted to make the rosy-cheeked twelve-year-old his child bride. Before he could feed and turn her, Bill and Ellen Harvelle showed up and took out the nest. Returned the daughter unharmed and had an educational session with the parents about the supernatural world. From then on, the motel had a permanent neon sign blinking in the window of the lobby: Hunters Welcome.

When Anna graduated from high school, she attended the University of Missouri-KC and graduated with a BS in Criminal Justice, then applied and was accepted at the Kansas City, Missouri police department. Learned she was not the only officer who knew about Hunters. Always carried silver bullets and packed a non-regulation shotgun with salt cartridges in her patrol car under a blanket in the trunk, just in case, along side one of her mom’s canning jars where a twice-blessed rosary constructed of glass beads was submerged in holy water.

Outside, it was windy, but the expected downpour had not yet begun.

Sam and Dean closed the door of their motel, chanted over the lock, and shared the duty of laying salt lines around the room as thoroughly and carefully drawn as in their father’s room.

Sam rummaged around his duffle bag and then turned on the television, found the Weather Channel, and planted himself on the couch, a map of the central states spread out on the coffee table in front of him, yellow highlighting marker at the ready, rooted out from a worn zippered leather case filled with school supplies, a gift from Missouri years ago to commemorate his first
day of kindergarten.

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The psychic who first introduced John to the truths about the supernatural world had come over to the motel where they were staying near Lawrence that September morning in 1988 with a plate of pancakes, a small jar of maple syrup, and a couple of dollars for milk money (sure that John would forget). And the case, which she had bought at an office supply store and had Sammy's name burnt into the side. Just like she had done for Dean four years earlier, which was before John hit the road.

For a time, after the fire, the Winchesters lived in a little apartment in a different part of town away from the house. When Dean was old enough, she took him to school, introducing herself to the teachers and principal as a family friend, ignoring the curious stares of the other parents, seeing a little white boy with a black companion. Had words that day with John about school and taking care of the boys.

Dean went to kindergarten and first grade pretty regularly that first year or so after Mary died and the fire. Missouri and some of Mary and John's friends took turns helping with the children, looking after Sammy, and making sure both boys were clean and clothed and fed.

But one day, John disappeared with the boys, and Dean learned that taking care of baby Sammy on the road was his job now as the older brother.

Sammy got to attend that first kindergarten back in Lawrence for two weeks before they were gone again.

Hunters and the employees of motley motels and diners taught the boys to read and do sums, and then the brothers helped each other, talking turns reading out loud and adding up numbers.

Dean kept his case in his duffel bag; used it to store business cards from key contacts from past cases, not limited to undertakers, crime lab technicians, forest rangers, and the proprietors of some of the best pie shops in the Western Hemisphere: his version of a portable database.

Sam would ceremoniously fill his with fresh pencils, pens, and erasers before Labor Day every year. It had accompanied him to every school, every class, every day for twelve years. Even now, he planned to use it at Stanford.

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Dean went into fussy domestic mode to work off some energy and give himself an excuse not to talk with Sam. He had finagled a luxury upgrade on their room, which meant a microwave and an office-sized refrigerator, plus a couple of extra tables and chairs. Dean’s bag of goodies for his brother and the ice chest filled with water bottles, sodas, and a few clandestine bottles of domestic beer sat on a rickety card table.

He unpacked the travel plaza drinks, putting the bottles of juice and tea in the fridge. Grabbed two bottles of beer from the ice chest. Opened them with the stainless steel church key he kept with the beers. Wiped them off with a hand towel and handed one to his little brother, who seemed mesmerized by the coverage of the evolving storm and took it without looking away from the screen.

Squeezed the remaining bottles of water, beer, and soda alongside Sam’s healthy drinks into the refrigerator and then dumped the water in the chest left over from the melted ice into the bathtub.
The big duffel bags were lifted from the floor and now slouched on their respective beds like hunting dogs, waiting their masters’ bidding.

Dean emptied the contents of the big bag from the travel plaza store onto the card table and grabbed the bag of movie candy. Ripped it open and dumped the miscellaneous collection of sugar treats onto the map in front of Sam, who protested the interruption without much heat and pushed the treats to the side. He did claim a small package of chocolate-covered mints and nodded his thanks.

While Sam watched the broadcast and marked up his map, Dean sprinted outside to the Impala, where it had begun to rain. He pulled out the black leather weapons bag from the trunk that he had packed in stages during the pit stops on the trip back from New York. Had selected a variety of guns, ammo, and sacred knives and swords from the depths of the trunk in anticipation for the coming clash with the coven. Didn’t want a fight with his father so left them in the car when John was around. Whispered a protection spell over the car and re-entered the room, his hair already dripping wet. Made sure to shake some water on his brother, who managed to nail him with a pillow from the couch in response, one-handed, without looking away from the television.

Extracted a brotherly smirk from Sam, which Dean counted as a win.

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The sky above Topeka had turned pitch black, except for roiling clouds that were backlit by a continuous lightning display as the massive weather fronts, like the movements of giant armies, collided and mixed, fueled by wet moist air swirling up from the Gulf of Mexico and pushed by winds keening east from the Rockies. The psychic Missouri always claimed that the biggest storms were sentient. Not evil, just forces of nature. But tonight, Sam and Dean could believe that the powers of the wind and lightning were being enslaved to do the bidding of the twelve Adepts sitting in a circle in a candle-lit cabin a few miles away.

A fire truck rushed by, headed north, sirens bansheeping ahead. The first of many.

Missouri rarely went on active hunts, but the brothers knew she was back in Lawrence, praying. She believed in God and Heaven and Angels, something John and Dean found at best naïve, a reflection of her good soul.

Ironically, because of the love that had embraced Sam from birth, the younger son found it easy to imagine celestial beings watching his back, stand-ins for his father and brother when times were tough.

(A very young Sammy decided God was an older version of John, but nicer, with time to play catch. And God would have gotten him a dog, if John had given God permission.)

The Weather Channel meteorologists were in emergency mode with their patented on-the-scene reporting style, which reminded the boys of war correspondents on the battlefield: a calm and serious façade superimposed over informed terror as enemy soldiers shouted, bullets traced the air around them, and missiles flew overhead.

The forecasters provided nerdy lectures about the physics of record-breaking storms. They pointed to a screen filled with graphics and explained the bright-colored maps with arrows showing wind direction and speed. The amorphous shapes indicating precipitation and cloud height looked like hungry amoebas.

Sam realized that millions were watching the reports from Kansas about the colossal 500-year
storm system that was threatening cataclysmic death tolls across the midsection of the country. It was scary and exciting. And somehow watching the event unfold on television made it more real than the sound of wind, rain, and now hail battering their motel door.

He felt humbled and proud that his father was leading a squadron of men and women into a deadly clash to eliminate the danger that hung over the heads of innocents in several states. He knew he had done his part in similar fights. He knew that the war against evil gave meaning and purpose to John and to Dean.

The difference for him is that they gave him meaning and purpose, which was why he had to leave and find a way to help them and to make their lives safer, a satisfying by-product of following his personal dreams of academic success and a career in law. Still helping people. Maybe even saving lives and putting some monsters behind bars.

The crisis with the witches had driven away the anguish he had felt just a few hours before, first, when he misunderstood Dean’s blunt statement about uncovering Sam’s secret, and then being whiplashed emotionally by Dean’s long, rambling dissertation about helping Sam.

But, for the first time, Sam felt real guilt.

It was one thing to keep secret information from his brother and father. What they didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them, etc. But now, Dean had constructed a plausible alternative universe and would be invested in helping his younger brother, taking up his familiar role as the One Who Takes Care of Sammy. Will waste his time with research and meetings and phone calls. Will want to talk. Will interview Sam about his goals and dreams, what was in his heart—all the feelings stuff that the brothers had avoided for years.

Dean’s desire to help his brother would require that Sam now lie actively, if he wants to maintain the multiple fictions regarding Dean’s plan over the next few months, until he told all and left for California.

Sam thought he knew how Pandora’s Box felt just before the Grand Opening, balloons and marching band notwithstanding.

He knew his older brother very well. Dean would feel like he’d been played for a fool when he learned that while he was worried about Sammy’s high school diploma and possible transfer credits from a two-year community college, a very capable Samuel had cut the cord legally, graduated from high school, and managed to be admitted to one of the top universities in the world. All before the age of eighteen. And he never said a word to his brother or father, never asked for their advice or help. As if they were incompetent, not good enough for the Boy Genius.

And what about Bobby, Pastor Jim, and all of the other Hunter friends who had helped Sam over the years? Each and every one of the behind-the-magic-curtain Sammy alliance members was prepared for the daunting task of working through and surviving both John’s yelling and Dean’s pouting when they learned the truth. Eventually, Dean and John would come to appreciate the good news about Stanford. No, dammit, the great news!

But what were their friends and allies supposed to say when Dean shows up unannounced with his Big Plan and asks them directly for favors for Sammy, seven years too late? And now the lies needed to distract and deflect Dean and John would be bigger in scope and scale. This wasn’t the right way to pay back the people who had helped him reach his dream.

Some actions, even well-intended, are hard to forgive. And consequences tend to snowball.
So, he had to tell John and Dean tomorrow, depending on what happened at Perry Lake tonight. Sam did not want to even think about the fact that they might not even have a father tomorrow.

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Just then, the first of the end-of-the-world alarms went off, the warning sirens that haunt the dreams of every kid who grows up in Midwest, no matter how old that kid gets. Winding through the sounds of rain and hail, designed to be heard.

Tells the brothers *I'm coming to get you.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for the comments and kudos. Much appreciated.

And thanks for finding mistakes.

If you have seen the sky turn green while standing in your own back yard, raise your hand.
Chapter Summary

The boys watch the storm from the motel room's television. There's good news and scary news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Topeka, Kansas and Perry Lake State Park, Kansas - 2001

Years later Sam would remember a discussion in a pre-law seminar at Stanford about evidence presented in a courtroom, and he would think of that night.

The debate had to do with the emotional impact of electronic media versus documents and live testimony on a witness stand. Film and eye-catching graphics displayed on a screen versus a human being talking about something they had experienced first hand. Facts and interpretations in different clothing. Data inflated by moving pictures. Data manipulated by tears, by the teddy bear clutched in a little girl’s arms for comfort. Which would seem more true to you, a jury member: the video of the crime scene and a skilled artist’s reconstruction of the actual act of violence or the person who found the body, weeping in front of you during a cross-examination.

A medical illustrator would argue that their rendition of a victim’s wounds in pen and ink would provide more and better information than the photos of the autopsy. Their professional education could require a major in pre-med, technical training in criminal investigation, and mastering the craft of the commercial artist. Working with law enforcement, they would know how to help focus the civilian’s eye on what is important while discarding distracting details that are provocative, but not useful. (But depending who paid their invoice, they could slant the images. And the trial. Of course.)

Having had firsthand experience with dozens of crime scenes and the process of extracting information from witnesses, Sam argued in class that both approaches were necessary. The sights, and smells–especially the smells–of a corpse of a child. The short window of time with the mother, who is trying to hold it together long enough to be of some use to the young-looking police cadet with the grass-green eyes before the drugs the kind EMT injected in her kick in. Both the real heartrending angst and the created maps and images and data aggregated into grids and charts are required, providing different information than that of reviewing a hundred static photos of the scene.

So what the meteorologists broadcasting from the Weather Channel and the experts from the National Weather Service and the National Center for Atmospheric Research and the reporters in Kansas City and the storm chasers in their SUVs, weighted down with equipment and cameras and bags of junk food were sharing was a view of the battle, miles above the fray, one which few Hunters had ever seen during their own wars against evil.

Words like oddity, abnormality, incongruity, aberration, rarity, and, with black humor, the time-worn “Time to get the heck out of Dodge, folks” were repeated, over and over.
Reports of local destruction were beginning to seep into the aired segments. And, as in any war, there was a rising body count: tornadoes, flooding, wind shears. Washed away bridges, flooded highways, drowned neighborhoods, debris in the air and floating down swollen rivers.

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Sam and Dean could feel the wind roar with bass notes vibrating against the walls of the motel like one of Dean’s beloved metal bands. And the television screen showed a creature, 70,000 feet tall, painted red, spreading east with tendrils into Missouri and north into Nebraska and Iowa.

It was 11 pm.

Sequestered in the room, the brothers had eaten through the junk food and the healthier fruit and power bars that Dean had bought as an apology gift for Sam, a lifetime ago. The juice and water and sodas and beer were gone as well. Dean bussed the room, throwing away wrappers and bagging up the trash, kept it neat, for something to do. Sam was glued to the couch. Had not spoken for hours. Dean had long since turned off the lights in the room, and the brightly colored maps reflected back on their faces, mostly the red and maroon of the highest clouds. Breaking records.

The boys searched for evidence that the Hunters were engaged, that they were having some impact. Nothing yet. All the reports were about a monster that no one could stop or so it seemed.

Most of the Midwest sat tight. Through the country’s mid-section, dotted with the big cities that grew tall and fat on agricultural and manufacturing and transportation, were millions of tough-minded folk who had grown up sitting out tornado watches and warnings in farm cellars and urban basements. They took the sirens seriously, but they knew from experience that this storm could not last long. It would blow over.

They were wrong, this time.

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Above Topeka, a colossus was coming to life, the equivalence of a Norse giant with a voracious appetite for human souls. Armies of Elementals (the power of the ancient classes of elements manifested in spirit form)–Water and Air and Ice and Fire (Earth was not called, not needed)–were assembling and marching into its maw, feeding its growing power.

The iron and silver sigils and the wardings painted on the walls of the motel room in red milk paint, crafted from the blood of lambs, were flickering in the darkened room, blue and gold and silver, still pushing back any of the evil influences of the storm. They would hold strong until the end of the world, the brothers were sure. The motel itself sat far enough from the Kansas River to avoid most local floods in normal rainfall, but this, of course, was not normal.

Hailstones formed aloft, lifted and dropped, over and over, layered in ice, until the winds could no longer hold them up, and they plummeted to earth, setting off car alarms across the greater metro area. Black funnels dipped down from the turmoil of clouds, teased the tops of the tallest trees and slipped back up, waiting for the signal to drop, and touch the ground. Fingers of death, waiting to claw and grip and crush with the weight of stolen cars and the debris of a thousand destroyed barns and businesses and schools and homes.

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Baby clung to the ground outside the motel room. Dean had made sure she was protected against
damage from any projectile, be it hailstone or rebar.

She was a metal beast, but she was loyal to a fault and would not budge. How can 3,500 pounds of Detroit steel be faithful and have a heart? Rumors of her sentience whispered in roadhouses frequented by the Hunter community.

There was that time, the stories would begin, when John was driving coast-to-coast during a bout of more than his usual pigheadedness, the boys in the back seat under a layer of blankets. He fell asleep, and when he woke up, the Impala was still rolling, steady and true, 100 miles and 80 minutes from when he last noticed a highway marker. Or when the brothers were outnumbered by a traveling nest of vampires in an empty lot in the middle of an urban wasteland, and suddenly Baby roared through the middle of the pack, killing some and scattering the rest, then rolled to a stop.

The car was still running. The brothers jumped in and drove. They did what they had seen and heard a hundred civilians do over the years: full-scale denial. And a mutually agreed-upon amnesia. Did ask Bobby once, while drinking cold cokes one warm night on his back porch, looking out on his junkyard, if cars ever, you know, bonded with their owners. Bobby glanced over at the Impala, and back at the boys, who both seemed to be looking everywhere but at the car.

“Maybe,” he said, and that was the last word, until events in later years could not be ignored. Another story.

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It was midnight, the witching hour, Central Daylight Savings Time.

Dean cleared his throat.

“Sam,” he said. “Talk to me. What do you see?”

“What do you mean?” he asked his older brother, not looking away.

“You know. You know stuff. School stuff. Science stuff. Half the words these bozos are using go right by me. What’s happening? Can you tell what’s happening to Dad? To the other Hunters? Why is it growing?”

Dean’s tone was respectful, and just a little bit desperate sounding.

Sam took a breath, inhaled and exhaled.

“Really?” he asked.

“Really,” said Dean.

So, with patience and goodwill, Sam again became Professor Sam. He grabbed his marker, stripped the jargon out of the pontifications on the screen, and explained to Dean what was going on, drawing on his map. The short story: the coven was sucking a giant coil of warm, wet air up from the Gulf of Mexico, for practical purposes a bottomless tank of fuel. And the prevailing winds, which were almost always from the West, were racing towards Topeka from the Rocky Mountains, where a thousand supernatural entities lived.

Most of these spirits were born of ancient Earth magic and were neutral, bound by Nature and bonded to their mountain homes, indifferent to the small affairs of human and monster and Adept or, as will discovered later, even Heaven and Hell. But they could be called upon, influenced even,
by the combined power of the Coven’s individual witches. Another boundless source.

So the energy kept flowing into the storm, with nothing natural or magical to interrupt it. Unless the witches could be killed and/or their magic disabled.

(Sam was adding his own footnotes and citations to the meteorologists’ Newtonian interpretation of the supernatural phenomena that the world was watching. The genius with a foot in both worlds, as mentioned before. Translating the physics within a context Dean could readily understand and accept.)

Dean felt like Sam was sweeping cobwebs from his brain. He said so, and Sam smiled.

“Thanks, De. That’s what a good teacher is supposed to do. That’s like a huge compliment, man.”

Dean’s ears reddened, a sure sign he was happy.

Okay, they were sitting in the dark, sated with sugar and alcohol, with the distraction of a live broadcast of a localized Armageddon.

What the hell. What the hell.

“Sammy…Sam.” Dean’s voice changed. He could see Sam stiffen.

“What’s happening, Sam,” he said. Sam knew he wasn’t talking about the storm.

Before Sam could answer new graphics bloomed, and a new group of experts appeared on the screen, with new sets of title cards and an updated roll of information at the bottom of the screen.

Simultaneously, two breaking stories headlined the news feed.

Someone in the production booth, where editorial decisions were being made, flipped a coin.

“First off, ladies and gentlemen, rare meteorological phenomena are being sighted in and around Topeka and Perry Lake to the northeast.

Photos and graphics flashed on the screen.

“Although experts disagree on their cause and even their existence, what can best be described as kugelblitz or ball lightning, the UFOs of the weather world, have been seen floating above the ground, moving randomly through fields and over open spaces, including above the Kansas River and its tributaries. They mostly are the size of melons and might number in the hundreds. They also are being pulled in the storm clouds by powerful updrafts.

“Our trained civilians observers in the region describe them as distinctly purple, (at which both boys yelled “Christo! Christo” at the screen like they were cheering on a favorite football team whose opponents were possessed), a development that surprises our experts. Several observers report that the lights appear to be originating from Perry Lake State Park and are expanding in number and size en masse.

“Local law enforcement says that although the park officially was evacuated a few hours before, a determined party of spring turkey hunters has insisted on staying in the park.”

Dean and Sam cheered and hugged, laughing.

“Son of a bitch,” shouted Dean.
“The group was armed, and given the emergency, park rangers and state police said they warned the men and women that they would not be able to rescue them even if a life-threatening crisis ensues, but that legal action might be taken after the emergency since they were disobeying direct orders from law enforcement.

“Now, equally surprising, are verified sightings of violet St. Elmo’s Fire, a well-documented and better-understood meteorological event involving what some refer to as plasma or ionized gas…”

The enthusiastic PhDs, brought in to explain both phenomena to the viewing audience, rapidly fell into Star Trek-like geek speak, like when Scotty or Geordi are explaining warp drive to other members of the Enterprise’s crew. The happy scientists, violating all the good practices of newscasting (talking over each other, talking too fast, using ten-dollar words) were undeterred by the hosts’ efforts to interrupt and steer the conversation (meaning: dumb it down for the average television viewer).

Sam was ecstatic, of course. Dean understood little, but enough to know that the amethyst had been activated and, a couple of hours ago, Dad and the other Hunters were alive.

The Weather Channel on-air team finally gave up, let their guests rant, then cut to a commercial. Herding kittens is tough, but truth be told, live, unedited television can be messy and a gift to a show’s ratings.

Meanwhile, both brothers ran to the windows and looked out. Through the opaque sheets of rain they saw the glimmers of purple light bobbling a few feet in the air and creating mirror images in the puddles below them, moving like a zombie horde southwest from the direction of the lake.

Suddenly, St. Elmo’s Fire appeared, starting as a small ball on the tip of the Impala’s radio antenna and growing as it snaked over its sleek body, lighting up the chrome, concentrating over the trunk where a sizable number of blessed and ‘chanted objects were stored. As quickly as it formed it disappeared.

When the boys turned around, the sigils and wardings in the room also were glowing purple. The grains of salt lined up on the floor trembled.

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2 am

The boys returned to the couch, huddled together, shoulder to shoulder. When the show returned after a very long commercial break (“What the hell,” groused Dean), there was a serious shift in the emotional pitch of the two hosts sharing on-air duties. No one was smiling. Most of the graphics were gone. Instead, on the screen behind the meteorologists was a close-up of a water-soaked reporter, who had apparently taken shelter with her cameraman inside a commercial garage

“Explosions have been heard in the vicinity of Perry Lake as well as through the greater Topeka metro area and beyond in the surrounding farmland,” said the reporter, without preamble. It was hard to tell if it was rainwater or tears that streaked her cheeks.

“Because of the flooding associated with the storm, law enforcement and other emergency personnel have not been able to reach the state park or the lake. No word on the cause of the explosions or the fate of the hunting party that refused to be evacuated. Observers close to the scene have reported a strong odor of sulphur.”

There are many unsubstantiated stories over the centuries of ball lightning appearing to explode or
disintegrate, leaving behind a smell of rotten eggs.”

“That’s good news, Sammy, right?” asked Dean, deferring to his brother’s scholarly knowledge of things supernatural.

For once, he was not the Older Brother; they were equals.

Sam shook his head.

“Don’t know, Dean.”

“I’m going to call Dad,” said Dean, knowing he would be reamed a new one for disobeying orders, but he had to know.

No signal.

A studio employee wearing a headset hurried on to the set from off-camera, and handed the lead host a sheet of paper. She glanced at it, frowned, and handed it off to her co-host, and addressed the production booth directly.

“Bill, put up the new information, please, and I understand we have someone from the Air Force in the queue. Please put him on, and let’s hold the commercial breaks.”

She knew her job, and the producers deferred to her judgment.

The screen showed a familiar map—a live radar feed of the storm, indicating the height of the clouds and intensity of the rainfall in the region.

“Bill, can you pull us into Topeka, up close?”

The perspective changed.

The map zoomed in, showing greater Topeka and Perry Lake, with the usual overlay of intense scarlet bleeding into a rarely used blood red maroon. Except…

Sam pointed excitedly at the screen.

“Look, Dean.”

“I see them, Sammy.” Dean shouted.

In real time, purple dots were appearing throughout the endless sea of red. They appeared to be shifting through the color spectrum swiftly, indicated a fast change in altitude and amount of rainfall. Like someone was using a high-powered shotgun. Just like shooting salt through a ghost. And as the dots shifted in color, they grew in size.

The host appeared at the edge of the screen, as did the face of an imposing looking Air Force colonel, who was staring intimidatingly at the invisible television audience through the camera’s eye. Unlike the previous guests, he did not smile, and he spoke without emotion.

With little urging, he told of scrambling additional ultrahigh altitude reconnaissance aircraft around and into the storm hours before. The surveillance equipment was picking up signals from electromagnetic phenomena that were entering the updrafts and were being carried to the top of the cloud formations, then pulled down by gravity and downdrafts, just like the formation of hailstones. Sort of like the clouds were being seeded.
As the host and the colonel continued talking their voices became softer, like the announcers for a golf tournament. Millions of people turned up the volume on their television sets and leaned in.

Dean had thrown his arm around his brother and was holding him close. The glow on the walls was fading, and the sound of the storm outside was diminishing.

“Do we celebrate, De?” asked Sam, leaning into the familiar comfort of his brother, warm and solid.

“Not yet,” said Dean. “Let’s wait. But it’s okay to feel happy.”

Without thinking he leaned in and kissed his brother’s cheek.

The tone of the newscast shifted again.

The face of a uniformed fire marshal appeared on the screen. The host was a different woman from the one who had been anchoring the broadcast for the last several hours. A new group of meteorologists and newscasters were relieving their colleagues, who were probably dead on their feet, only able to function by mainlining caffeine.

Topeka, Kansas and Perry Lake State Park read the captions, and the word Fire! was streaming repeatedly in the feed.

The marshal, tired and sad, was reporting on a fire that was raging through the cabins around Perry Lake amidst the debris scattered by an intense but short-lived twister that had touched down, taking out buildings and trees, and providing tinder for the flames. Although the park had been evacuated hours before, two groups of civilians were feared to be lost in the wind and flames: a group of women who had rented a cabin for a family barbecue and the group of turkey hunters mentioned by law enforcement in earlier broadcasts.

And, more breaking news: "Forecasters tell us to expect a cloudless dawn as the Storm of the Century is dissipating as rapidly as it formed..."

Sam looked up at his brother’s face, grabbed the remote, and turned off the sound on the television.

Dean was fumbling with his cell phone. His big strong brother, with nerves of tempered steel, was shaking so hard he could not find the right button for his father’s number on speed dial. He took a breath, found it, clicked, and waited.

No signal.

“Dad?” Dean spoke into the empty air, eyes blank.

And, with perfect timing, there was a strong knock at the door.

Chapter End Notes

First, apologies to the good people of Kansas and those who live in and around their Capital City. Have had the pleasure of visiting many times. Great BBQ, for sure. Also, a big "sorry" to the residents of Perry and those in residence near Perry Lake State Park. I hope you understand your sacrifice was for a good cause.
Second, the introduction regarding medical illustration is a classic debate in the world of scientific illustration. One of my relatives was a medical illustrator, and as a family, we used to reenact crimes scenes after dinner to help her in her work.

Third, yes I think Baby is sentient, and I have a piece called When Baby Woke Up, which I hope to finish before the end of this century.
Reunion

Chapter Summary

John comes back to the motel, and the boys take care of him. He tells them what happened, and they get ready to leave Kansas. They share a family moment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Topeka, Kansas and Perry Lake State Park, Kansas - 2001

The boys rushed in unison to open the door. John swayed, duffel bag in hand and dropping it on the ground, fell into their arms.

“Getting heavy, old coot,” huffed Dean, tears spilling from his eyes.

"Respect, young man, respect,” wheezed John, but he managed a smile.

They manhandled their father to the couch and immediately, following post-hunt protocol, began stripping the wet and bloody clothes from his body.

“Dad…” asked Sam, as skilled as any emergency room nurse, was checking his father’s pulse points and reflexes, probing with his long fingers for wounds.

“Blood ain’t mine, kiddo,” said John, slurring his words from exhaustion.

“Think…it’s Sonny’s, maybe Caroline Engel’s, she tried to save her baby sister Maggie…they both went down. Got the bodies of four good Hunters in the back of the truck. Those left standing, they took the others. Eighteen went in. Six came out. I was lucky.”

His sons stripped him down to ancient boxers. Years of abuse had left him looking like an aged champion prize fighter, battered, with sagging muscles, the beginnings of a beer belly, and a constellation of scars and broken bones, twisting his limbs where they had been set in the field not quite right. But an iron will sustained the middle-aged Hunter, fueled by hatred and grief. He was a big man, muscled from real work, not a gym. He still could knock out most any human opponent and most monsters with one punch.

Bruises were blossoming on his arms and torso from debris thrown at him and other Hunters as they approached the cabin.

“The gem saved me,” said John, “and the Hunters who were nearest to me and the truck.”

He closed his eyes and slumped against the couch.

Dean ran out to see if coffee was available in the lobby. The storm was dissipating quickly. However, most of the power in the city was down and out, so the motel building was relying on back-up generators.

The night auditor had stayed on the premises despite the storm, determined to watch the place and
keep it safe. Had watched the storm coverage. She knew her priorities, and fresh coffee was brewing. She had laid out the free breakfast early. The motel always had a policy of free coffee and donuts for truckers, travelers, and local law enforcement. She anticipated early responders to the disaster would need to fuel up.

Also, like the family that owned the place, she was Hunter-savvy. Knew something was up.

Dean grabbed four cups of black coffee and capped them, while she bagged him three cinnamon sticky buns. He put the drinks and food in a bigger bag along with plates, cutlery, and a fistful of napkins and trotted out the door. Stopped to pay, but she waved him out the door.

John’s skin was cold and blue. Gently, Sam murmured to him, calling him Dad. Grabbed a blanket from his bed and covered him, tucking him in as their roles reversed, father and son.

Left him to run a hot bath, dumping into the tub an entire bottle’s worth of salt from the Dead Sea and a mason jar’s worth of holy water, creating a spa-worthy mineral bath. He added crushed handfuls of aromatic herbs, pretty much decimating half of their portable apothecary.

Dean returned. Placed the breakfast bag on the card table and pulled out the coffee cups, leaving two and uncapping one as he approached the couch. For a moment he stood and looked at his father. Despite the fact this wasn’t the first time he and Sammy had patched up their father and each other after a dicey encounter with witches and the Unknown, this time felt different.

We save people, he thought. Who saves us?

Shook the feeling away, and said his father’s name. Got him to open his eyes and held the cup while he carefully tipped a small, hot, mouthful between blue lips. A healthier color crept over John’s face, and pretty soon he was reaching for the cup himself.

The boys waited for him to finish the hot drink and then helped him to his feet. By tacit agreement he left his boxers on, and his sons steered him to the bathroom. Gave him a little privacy while he took care of business, waiting to rush in and grab him if he started to fall.

“Boys,” John said, in a small voice.

Dean and Sam held his arms as he slowly sunk into the bathtub, miraculously big enough to hold the man and let him submerge comfortably. (Most motel plumbing isn’t big enough to wash a wet cat.) The water bubbled as the sacred ingredients neutralized any residues left from the Coven’s spells and imbued the air with scents of peace and safety from the herbs in the mix.

The boys left briefly and returned, bearing gifts. Dean had the cinnamon pastry on one of the plates he borrowed from the lobby, sticky with syrup and covered with crushed pecans, cut into small slices, and another cup of coffee, still hot in its insulated cup. Sam brought a large lavender-tinted beeswax candle, which he set on the back of the commode and lit. Like sage smudge sticks, beeswax candles are cleansing tools for Adepts. Some might have thought it was a little overdone considering the powerful ingredients in the bathwater, but Sam was taking no chances.

Dean balanced the plate on the broad rim of the tub and stuck a fork in the biggest piece of sticky bun. He put the cup next to it.

“Want some ‘me’ time?” ask Dean, his voice rougher than usual.

The canon sometimes implies that John had no emotions. The opposite was true: He felt too much. He was touched at the devotion of his boys. With a grin, he reached for the coffee and drank a big gulp, then speared a piece of the buttery treat.
“Grab a fork, said John.

“Let’s celebrate.”

The boys grabbed their own plates, a pastry for each, and their own cups of coffee. Sam handed out the forks and knives, and then turned out the bathroom’s overhead light, leaving the golden glow of the candle to illuminate the room. The brothers sat cross-legged on the floor, and the Winchesters dug in.

Between bites of what might have been the best sticky buns to be found along the I-70 corridor—even Sam didn’t complain about not having his obligatory rabbit food, and Dean? Dean was in an altered state—John backtracked and told the details about the evening, from the beginning.

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Meeting up with the other Hunters in Perry. A quick huddle and then driving up into the state park. Seeing what first looked like a waterspout over the reservoir and realizing that the witches were calling up more Elementals, and water sprites were rising in a macabre dance, glowing a ghoulish green.

How the convoy drove closer, the sound of the engines cloaked with the best Pastor Jim could conjure. John’s ears hurt as the air pressure dropped. He removed the curse box from the hemp bag, opened it, and just after he muttered the unlocking spell and released the amethyst’s power, Heaven and Hell, in the most literal sense, broke loose.

A ball of purple light erupted in the cab of the truck from the silk bag where the gem was stored and began expanding rapidly. It spun, like a planet, and then flattened out, morphing into a classic late-night B movie flying saucer, as it engulfed the truck. John said he felt nothing as its aura moved through him; had felt more substance walking through a rising fog bank on a Lake Michigan beach at dusk.

More balls of the same purple light emerged from the rotating disc of energy, each with a life of its own. John said that it was like watching the formation of a solar system in quick time, with its own rings of asteroids and comets radiating from the central sun. Was too awestruck to be afraid. Many rose into the storm, and John could hear explosions in all directions, like fireworks and gunfire on the 4th of July.

The lights moved fast enough to protect the vehicles closest to the truck, but not fast enough for most of the Hunters. Evidently the witches used their command of the Elementals to rip up trees and buildings and then weaponize the chaff as the team of Hunters approached the cabin. He saw most of the small fleet of cars and trucks, his friends and allies, damn it, good and brave Hunters all, lifted from the ground amidst a cyclone of debris and be battered to death. And then dropped back to earth. Bodies were crushed. Even the extra warding typical of most Hunter vehicles didn’t protect them.

Caroline Engel and her younger sister Maggie, affectionately called Magpie by Hunters who knew her since she was a toddler, landed safely. But Maggie leaped from the protection of the car, ignoring the instructions to wait so that the Hunters could attack as a team. Brave and stupid. She ran outside of the influence of the purple light, and Caroline followed her. They both died as a giant cottonwood, plucked from the ground like a garden weed, fell, directed by unseen hands. John swore he heard a ghostly chuckle as the ground shook from the impact.

He could see the cabin through the chaos of the rain and lights. It was glowing the same putrid green as the waterspout, the same color green that heralds the birth of a tornado. Entities formed
and rode the incessant wind, then dissolved.

From the hemp bag on the seat of the truck John pulled a small bundle of mistletoe, tied together with silk thread. From his pocket he drew out his favorite Zippo lighter (one of several), a World War II antique. It still held the sympathetic magic of having been carried successfully into ground battles across the European theater by an Army grunt that swore it brought him luck. Died peacefully in his own bed at the ripe age of 83. John bought the lighter at an estate sale, where he was looking for bargain silver to melt into bullets.

John lit the mistletoe, which burned with a bright blue-green light and which he counted on being able to shine through the miasma of green and purple swirling outside the truck. Cracked the window—the fumes are problematic in close quarters. Within a minute he saw similar lights illuminating the interiors of the survivors’ vehicles.

He unhooked the pile of weapons from the web of bungee cords and grabbed the repeating shotgun, already loaded with witch-killing cartridges. Every Hunter had their own recipe, which they decided was the right way to go. More chance of getting it right.

The pendant in its silk pouch lay in the breast pocket of John’s jacket, so he could bring it to the witches. It had been pulling insistently towards the cabin since John had taken it from the curse box. Squirmed in his pocket like a bloodhound on a short leash.

As one, the remaining Hunters exited their vehicles and walked towards the cabin. Starlight burned through the remaining storm clouds and opened up the sky. But winds still whipped around at ground level and attacked the Hunters with broken bricks and pieces of glass, most of which they could shrug off. John felt like he was walking through a bar brawl, being hit only when a drunken assailant got lucky. But the witches were not giving up.

Like the Wild Hunt’s hounds, a pack of the purple globes accompanied the Hunters, and the door of the cabin flung wide as they pushed through, springing open magic and human locks alike. Most of the globes vanished as their power was tapped, but some still had enough juice left to explode, blowing holes in the mist and through the walls of the building.

Inside the Hunters could hear a dozen voices, babbling black spells and curses in a cacophonic fugue, overlapping the words and, in effect, mutually cancelling most of the potency of the witches’ magic. It was telling that experienced Adepts would make such a beginner’s mistake. They knew their time was up.

The end of the witches was anti-climactic, but quite satisfying. They shrieked as the Hunters entered their hideout and the bullets from a half dozen weapons shredded their bodies, the amethyst’s power having destroyed the last remaining magicked protection spells.

The Hunters left the remains. Usually they would have ransacked the bungalow, looking for tools and potions and spell books they could analyze and perhaps make useful. But no one seemed inclined to wade into the cesspool of black magic artifacts that the witches had assembled to complete their unholy mission.

What finished the job was a generous splash of holy oil through the front door and the sacrifice of one brand-new Zippo lighter, purchased four days earlier at a convenience store in Iowa by one of the Hunters, a withered old man named Jeremiah, who most probably resembled the prophet for whom he was named.

He flicked the lid open one-handed, snapped the flint wheel, and tossed the lighter in the pool of oil. The resulting fire raged white—John imagined that it actually might be a blessed species of Fire
Elemental—as it encountered the evil that soaked the interior of the cabin. It swallowed the bodies and the vestiges of the coven’s handiwork in waves of flame, quickly climbing the walls. Anything touched by evil was consumed, and soon it spread outside the bungalow, drowning the remnants of the coven’s misdeeds in heat and light.

The surviving Hunters fled and worked quickly to pull the bodies from the crushed vehicles to burn later in a proper tribute to the courage of their companions.

John drove away, back to Topeka and the motel. He pulled up outside his boys’ room, turned off the engine, and sat. He did not realize until then how sick and sore he felt. Took the silk pouch with the pendant, now quiet, out of his jacket’s pocket and tucked it back into the curse box. Might be his imagination, but it felt lighter. Tossed the box back into the hemp bag. Took a breath and looked at the pile of weapons in the cab. Thought about the bodies under the tarp. Decided he would stuff the most valuable pieces into his duffel bag, including the curse box, and ward the truck. Any looters were more likely to be in the center of town, looking for stores without power (and working alarm systems) but probably law enforcement was out and about. And the good citizens of Kansas were more than capable of protecting their own.

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During John’s debriefing, the boys sat, hypnotized, forgetting their gooey desserts, eyes filled with tears, mouths slightly open. Without noticing, they moved closer to each other and eventually were holding hands, the same way they did when they were little boys, alone, watching scary movies, giving and seeking comfort.

The coffee was cold, and the sticky buns weren't as good without hot java or cold milk to wash them down. And despite the bathwater’s augmentation with Biblical healing salts and classic herbs, at the end of the day, it was just bathwater that was losing its embracing warmth. Time to shower, find clean clothes, and real food. Preferably Kansas-style ribs and shots of Jack Daniels. Onion blossoms and yes Dean, think we can find some pie.

“Out, out,” scolded John, who actually felt pretty good, all things considered.

The boys helped each other up, grabbing the cups and dishes, pushing and shoving, tumbling out of the bathroom like puppies, and closing the door behind them. Both of them grinning. Couldn’t keep their hands off each other, sparring, throwing each other off balance, and then catching each other at the last moment. Had to do something with that energy, which felt suspiciously like joy.

Sam switched to a local station to catch the early morning news. Lot of local damage, some flooding, power lines down, but the storm had blown apart. Like the snapping of a giant rubber band the mountain and forest entities were winging back to their homes in the Rockies, circulating in a great arc at the bottom of a high pressure system. The flow of moist, wet air from Gulf had slowed from a run to a slow walk.

The Winchesters needed a real breakfast and then to find an empty field and logs to split for the four pyres. John knew a farmer, 20 miles away. Then a really good dinner and west to Denver, where John was to meet with some Hunters to debrief them about the battle and the amethyst, in case of them needed to use it against a future great evil.

The sun was coming up, and the cell phone signals were back on. They packed up the Impala and the truck. Sam being the youngest borrowed an industrial wet vac from housekeeping and cleaned up the salt from both rooms, and Dean bagged up the trash and took it to the dumpster. When asked about what to do about the holy oil sigil that had scorched the door of John’s room, the manager said she would treat it as a feature. Cover it up with a fresh coat of paint, but let Hunter guests
know it was there.

John watched as the boys packed up the Impala, and frowned.

“What were you planning to do with that weapons bag, boy? We are having a talk tonight. Sam, you’re gonna inventory our supplies. Dean, call Bobby and Pastor Jim; fill them in.”

Chapter End Notes

Might be a few days between this post and the last chapters; the Real World is intruding. Two endings; the next chapter is about the choices Sam in making and the final chapter, the epilogue, takes us 20 years in the future and resolves Sam's plan and the boys' relationship.
Celebration

Chapter Summary

The Winchesters celebrate, and Sam's made a new friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Topeka, Kansas - 2001

By nightfall, they had built the pyres, burned the bodies, scattered the ashes in the swollen Kansas, and were celebrating the life and times of four of the victims of the Hunters’ raid: Caroline Engel, her sister Margaret, retired firefighter Regis, and Texan Travis, who was known to go on hunts with an authentic Kentucky long rifle that he would use with deadly precision. His specialty had been taking down monsters that you did not want to get too close and personal with.

John made the call; Regis had a brother waiting back in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. He thanked John with formal politeness for the notification and then hung up abruptly. Travis had outlived his family. Caroline and Magpie had only each other.

Their manic, magicked, hyper-caffeinated energy was failing, so they packed into a small motel at the west end of Topeka. The boys shared a room with two beds, as usual. John had them kick their shoes off and lie down, and he gave them each a swallow of something out a pocket flask. Knocked them out for three hours. Took a swig himself when he got back to his single room. They all woke up refreshed three hours later.

The Winchesters ended up at a bar, open late, with exactly the kind of ribs Dean and John were hoping to find, smoky and glazed in Kansas City’s best sauce. Meat fell off the bones as they lifted them to their lips in unison, sauce dripping from their chins onto their big, thin plastic bibs printed with silly cartoons.

And for Sam, there was a rotisserie chicken, okay, eventually two rotisserie chickens, marinated and then basted in citrus and pineapple juices. Something fancy for the ladies, the waitress had said with a wink, which of course led to John and Dean double-teaming their kid about his hair. Again. But Sam didn’t mind, for once. Too busy smiling. Could not remember the last time he smiled so much with his brother and father, the three of them together.

When their waitress, who could have played linebacker for the Jayhawks in the day, delivered the third slab of ribs she asked them if they were going to need a doggie bag for the leftovers.

Dean shook his head as he pulled another bone from the rack, his mouth filled with cheesy mashed potatoes to cleanse his palate for the next round of smoky goodness.

“Will finish these. Maybe order more. Celebrating,” Dean said.

“What’s celebrating?” she asked.

One beat, two beats.
“Everything,” said Sam, staring fondly at his family.

The shots of Jack and the pitcher(s) of beer didn’t hurt the mood.

The bar was packed to its rafters, holding its own informal celebration for survivors of the storm, which already had been nicknamed “The Colossus of Topeka.” Verifying the legal age of the tall kids with the dad who had the eyes of a professional killer was not high on the bouncer’s priority list that night. Management was focused on making sure no one would drink themselves to death and conversely, to keep the drinks coming.

The small motel they had checked into was across the alley, figuring they were going to need to be able to walk to their beds that night. The Impala and the truck were parked under a streetlight in front, waiting for the next journey in peaceful companionship.

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Up in Blue Earth, Pastor Jim would be updating a display covered with small black iron plaques in the basement of his church. Told his congregation that it was a memorial wall for a special, secret branch of the Armed Services that he had served with as a chaplain during the Vietnam War. They still were active, but they could not be acknowledged when individuals passed away, as with CIA operatives.

The plaques held a first name and a date, if it was known. Hunters aren’t the best at keeping in touch, and would fall beneath the radar for years, so there was a section of the wall devoted to colleagues in arms who were deemed to be Missing in Action.

That Sunday, the good man, Adept and Hunter, would ask his congregation to pray with him for the souls of the team members that did not come back.

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The jukebox was blasting iconic 60s rock-and-roll, and people had to yell to be heard. So, of course, the music was turned up higher. Strangers were buying each other drinks, strangers were dancing with each other, and the room was hot with a very mortal form of magical energy, if you get my drift. Many new friendships were forged that night the old-fashioned way, two of which resulted in longterm, happy marriages.

Soulmates often manifest their mutual bond after cataclysmic disasters.

The father and his boys hadn’t gone unnoticed even though the trio was ensconced in a corner booth where they were partially hidden from the crowd for most of the night.

John was sitting on one side of the booth, by himself, with his back to the wall. So far, the distraction of the witches and the deaths of his friends and the ultimate triumph of Good Magic over Evil was enough to block out his grief and guilt and hatred for a time, emotions more powerful than the black magic that the dark Adepts had been brewing in their coven’s cauldron.

The boys sat on the opposite side of the booth, their backs to the room, Dean as usual taking the outside seat to guard his baby brother.

John let himself smile at his boys and their antics, as they messily fed each other fries dripping in sauce and awkwardly arm-wrestled to a draw and pummeled their father with requests for more Hunter stories and more answers regarding magic and car mechanics. Sort of the same thing.

For a while both brothers stretched their legs and strolled together around the bar. They decided
they weren’t going to scam the room. Folks were too drunk and too happy; would not have been sporting, and they didn’t need the money at the moment. But that didn’t mean they couldn’t show off. John watched in appreciation as Dean played pool hall tricks with a borrowed stick for applause, not bets, and younger brother Sam pretty much owned the dart board against the local champion, who led the cheers at the end of an impossible run of bulls-eyes.

When they returned and squeezed back into their seats, John lifted his latest glass of Bud to salute them.

“Good job, boys, good job,” he said, and the brothers blushed in unison.

The very pretty 30-something waitress, tall and curvy, name of Bethany, with the impossibly long legs and strawberry blonde curls, left her station to check out the eye candy in the corner booth up close, at the urging of her linebacker aunt, who had been vetting theWinchesters on behalf of the eligible girls in the room. She walked over to their booth with a fresh pitcher of beer. On the house.

She read John like the proverbial open book. John’s drinking and smoking had taken its toll on the ex-Marine and mechanic, but he still looked good. With enough liquor, he could drown the memory of his wife’s face, even if it was just for a night, and bury himself in the scent of not-her-cologne and in a blur of soft skin and smooth arms and legs until dawn.

She knew he would clean up just fine, and she liked a man with some real time clocked in on his shift, but she had ceased to equate romance and tragedy since high school. Had plowed through several classic Russian novels, which taught her about Life.

Dean, well, was Dean. Dean turned on the charm, as smooth as turning the key in Baby, the Impala’s motor simming to life under his skilled hands.

What new could be said about a face that occupied the daydreams of diner waitresses (and more than a few waiters) from Bellingham to Boca Raton? And, he was nice. Flirty, polite, confident without arrogance when it came to his dealings with the help. Depending on their finances, a good tipper, and generous and thoughtful in the bedroom, even though he seemed to be cutting fewer notches in his belt once he hit 20 and Sam, coincidentally, was stumbling through puberty and growing like Georgia kudzu.

So she smiled at Dean, and he smiled back, and Sam knew that Dean would be leaving as soon as the woman’s shift was over, or maybe come back for her in the early morning, if the Colossus party continued past legal hours. But she looked nice, happy nice, and so pretty, and Sam wanted his brother to be happy.

Sam was still a boy, or so his family thought, someone for motel clerks to tease and Hunters to punch affectionately on the shoulder or jaw. But this night was different. Bethany’s eyes had slid off of Dean, and she was looking at Sam.

She had tilted her head and her long bangs fell across her face, just so she would have the excuse to flick them to the side, drawing attention to her high cheekbones and blue eyes flecked with aquamarine and gold.

She saw tilted fox eyes, with a depth of color like that of rare, black opals, and smooth skin–dark cream with just a hint of coffee and chocolate (wondering what it would taste like). He was slightly tipsy, which softened and broadened his smile, showing off perfect white teeth, and, those dimples, you know the ones I mean, and (he had stripped out of the usual Winchester flannel uniform because of the heat in the crowded bar) broad shoulders and muscles straining under one of his brother’s old band t-shirts that was once too big for him–like last year, maybe?
Hair, chestnut and clove touched with gold and a tint of red, long enough to frame a strong jaw. From a distance, she had watched him stride, long-legged and broad-backed, shoulder-to-shoulder, with his fair-faced, green-eyed brother.

So, she leaned over the table, at just the right angle to indicate to John and Dean who her target was, and with a strong arm (pitched hay bales and a couple of state softball championships in her day) poured Sam a long, slow refill.

John smiled, settled against the back of the booth, and busied himself with another couple of ribs.

Sam looked up at the woman who seemed to have eyes only for him, and he grinned, a big Winchester goddamn hero’s grin. Confident, just like when those professors at the colleges he and Dean visited would try to trip him up on history and grammar and mathematical puzzles. He did not remember, for once, to keep himself small and shy. He gently, gently pushed up against Dean, who was watching the silent exchange.

“Wow,” thought Big Brother.

Then, wait, as Dean's brain caught up with his keen Hunter powers of observation, he noticed that she was old enough to be Sam’s mother, hey, his mother and a few years spare change, which did not seem to be deterring either of them.

Without thinking, Dean slid out from the bench and stood up, moving out of the way.

Sam uncoiled himself into Bethany’s personal space, just about eye-to-eye; she must have been 5’11” in her regulation hi-tops. The bar had a sports theme, and the staff wore black pants and striped referee shirts. Bethany’s was unbuttoned down to the tip-top of a lacy bra, which perfectly matched her eyes and played peekaboo as she breathed. And Sam noticed that she breathed. Deeply. And frequently.

Chapter End Notes

Just needed some more good times, okay. They all deserve.
Flotsam and Jetsam

Chapter Summary

Sam might be changing his mind about leaving his brother and father, but will it be too late? And Dean might be facing some truths about his brother. And, of course, they are not talking about Dean's proposal or Sam's real secret. Yet.

Chapter Notes

Flotsam and Jetsam: Kinds of shipwreck and debris. For the layperson (not a maritime lawyer) the aftermath of a disaster. Sometimes, treasures can be found.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Topeka, Kansas, 2001

Bethany put the pitcher on the booth’s table, took Sam by the hand, and led him to the back door of the bar and out into the clear night air. They were gone ten minutes, and when they returned, they were smiling. Hair, the dark chestnut and the strawberry gold, was mussed. A more than a peek of that pretty aquamarine lace was showing, and a broad smudge of pale peach lipstick decorated Sam’s mouth.

The waitress straightened her shirt with a little tug and ran her fingers through her hair. Grabbed a clean napkin from a tabletop near the booth, spit on the edge, and wiped her lipstick from Sam’s face. Then, she wiped the rest of the lipstick off of her mouth, hard enough to rosy up her lips. Folded up the napkin and tucked it into a pocket in her pants. Presto, and she was back on the job. Break over.

“Keep the pitcher,” she said. “No charge.”

Sam watched her walk away, swaying her hips. He looked a little lovesick and happy. It was a night to be happy.

Dean already had scooted back onto the booth’s bench, his hands folded on the table as if in prayer. Sam turned to stand next to the booth and waited for Dean to exit and let him slide into his established place by the wall. But not tonight. Dean just stared, expressionless, and patted the space next to him. Sam slid in. Dean had switched their plates and glasses.

For the first time, Dean had given up his symbolic role as Sam’s guardian. Sam was not sure how he liked that.

Meanwhile, once again John’s late night demons had taken possession, and he was locked up in his prison of memories. Times like this he would become unresponsive. His sons knew that this mood was a red zone, where their father was most likely to start a bar fight for no reason or go out on his own and punch a hole in a brick wall in a deserted alley.
If they were lucky, he would pass out first, drowned in cheap whiskey and beer.

Tonight, they were lucky.

The brothers cleared the dishes and glasses away from their father’s side of the booth’s tabletop, pushing them to the edge for the busboy, a tall kid working his way through Washburn University, to whisk away.

(Which, by the way, has a stellar law school. Sam already had researched it, just in case.)

Their waitress, whose name turned out to be Edna (mother of six with a cop husband who adored her), returned with a fond look, pointedly ignoring the snoring man slumped against the wall.

“We’ll take care of our dad,” said Sam.

“Sure, sweetie. You boys want anything else? We’re closing up the kitchen in a few minutes, at midnight, but we’ll be serving booze and bar food until 2 am.”

Sam took charge.

“Pitcher of ice water, please, another plate of fries, and I think we killed off this bottle of ketchup. Sorry.” He tilted his head and gave her the full force of those dimples and hazel eyes.

She was, as they say, happily married, but not dead. A story to tell her husband when he finally came home from what would be a triple shift, dealing with the aftermath of the witches’ collective bad temper.

“And two virgin Marys, please,” said Sam.

She snorted and walked away to fill the order. Sam knew that Dean knew that tomato juice with healthy doses of lemon and lime juice, hot sauce, and Worcestershire was an effective prophylactic against the worst effects of mixing beer, whiskey, beer, tequila, beer, absinthe (?), beer, and vodka shots. And beer. And using a grandmother’s name for what was pimped up breakfast juice for underage drinkers irritated Dean—a bonus for Sam’s inner annoying younger brother.

Sam threw a long arm around his brother’s shoulders. Pulled him close in a one-handed hug. Bethany’s perfume, something with roses, still clung to his t-shirt and hair. Dean leaned in for a moment, scenting his brother’s neck like an affectionate puppy.

“It’s nice, De,” said Sam, apropos of nothing at all. Got a smile out of Dean. Counted it as a win. Gave his shoulder a squeeze. Took back his arm, but they still sat close, thighs and arms brushing. Nice.

They finished the giant plate of fries, demolishing a fresh half bottle of ketchup. Dean started talking, and they discussed witches, guns, the pendant, the right way to smoke and sauce pork chops, the pros and cons of giant turkey legs, the speculations about Bobby’s rumored romance with someone in law enforcement back in South Dakota, and what they might want to add to Baby’s inventory when they returned to Blue Earth and Pastor Jim’s hidden cabinet.

The bartender had floated orange, lemon, and lime slices in the oversized pitcher of ice water; they drank the whole thing. The cold cut through the lingering fog of alcohol, as good as caffeine, which meant that even though they were processing an evening’s worth of steady drinking, more brain cells were on board without being wired up. Easier to fall asleep. (A drunk drinking three cups of coffee, trying to sober up faster, is just a wide-awake drunk.)
Copious amounts of ice water was a trick Sam learned from a high school theater teacher, a funny guy who was nice to the kids (no phony prima donna crap), who wore jeans to school, and who had acted with a well-known theater company in Chicago, until he followed his love back to the family’s homestead outside of small town Idaho.

Dean pretended to choke on the tomato juice concoction, but he liked it, liked the peppery seasoned salt and the enormous green olive and the big stick of celery. Liked the old-fashioned Louisiana hot sauce bite.

(Sam had nursed both his father and brother through enough hangovers to earn a residency in Hepatology at the Mayo Clinic. He had concocted his own wellness formula, based on interviews with Hunters, shamans, and bartenders, starting with plenty of water or plain fresh juice the night before (hence the pimped up tomato juice and the pitcher), massive doses of C and B-complex vitamins, herbs such as milkweed that supported liver cleansing, and a spell he learned from Pastor Jim. What the good man never told Sam until he was much older was that the spell was just a string of nonsense syllables. Placebo effect. Try it, create your own. It works!)

The bar was emptying as the sleepy customers of Topeka’s premier rib bar walked and drove very carefully back to their intact homes; this side of the city was mostly untouched by flood or severe wind.

Being the state capital, there was a sense of urgency: getting roads, streetlights, and the power and phone lines working ASAP. Much of the town would operate normally by daybreak; the closer to Perry, the worse things looked.

Sam pushed out of the booth, stretching and yawning. Grabbed his flannel shirt and stepped aside as Dean slid out behind him.

“I’ll take care of this,” said Sam, as he fished his wallet from his back pocket, a gift from Hunter Rufus Turner on his 13th birthday.

“Consider it a Bar Mitzvah present,” said Rufus.

Dean seemed content to let Sam take the lead. Curious.

Sam found their waitress Edna talking to Bethany. He topped off the total of their bill with an extra $50, kissed both women chastely on their respective cheeks, and returned to the booth.

The bar as well as the little motel they had checked into the day before were off the beaten path, known mostly to locals. The truckers and tourists had booked into the big chain motels by the Interstate, which is why the Winchesters were able to land two rooms so close to the bar, despite the storm leaving dozens of people in the region stranded and/or temporarily homeless. The Red Cross had set up an emergency shelter in the gym at Topeka High School but mostly folks in need ended up with family and friends and co-workers and neighbors.

Most people are good people, wherever you go.

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The motel rooms were small and clean; John had a queen to himself; the boys had a room with two twins. The showers were decent, the walls were thick, and old-style hardwood floors made laying salt lines easier.

The two young men had mastered the art of moving their unconscious father from point A to point
B. They walked him across the alley from the bar to the motel, each with a shoulder wedged under an arm, and woke him enough so mostly his feet didn’t drag.

When they were little boys, sympathetic Hunters and bystanders helped them out.

Once a couple of scary-looking grey-haired bikers, big and really big, retired military with grandkids of their own at home, watched what were then preteen Dean and a skinny little Sammy struggle to get their comatose father to his feet in a roadhouse somewhere in the oil country in west Texas. The two former Army Rangers stepped up when some questionable dudes, a small gang of petty thieves who stole copper pipes and the like from construction sites, started eyeing the pretty kids with inappropriate attention.

Dean had what was then his father’s Bowie knife hanging inside a sheath, hidden under his oversized canvas jacket. Prepared to use it if they laid hands on Sammy. If the dudes had had their way with the brothers, John would have hunted them down and slit their throats. Or dropped them off at a tame vamp nest, the kind whose fangs lived off of blood banks and cows, with the assurance that the men died slow in exchange for John’s walking away. So the dudes had no idea that having those bikers scare them half to death was a blessing in disguise.

The bikers shooed off the perverts, talked to the boys, and satisfied Dean they meant no harm. The really big one lifted John up, bridal style, and carried him out to the Impala. He drove John and the boys back to their shared motel room with the two double beds, followed by his friend on one of their Harleys. They helped the boys tuck their father in, checked out the motel room, opening drawers and cupboard doors, and left Baby’s keys and a stack of clean twenties for groceries on a side table.

“You kids okay?” he asked.

“Yessir,” Dean said.

“Lock the door behind me, buddy,” he said, and he and his friend rode back to the Texas roadhouse.

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Every year it got easier, as the boys grew up. At least, physically.

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They had paid for late departure when they booked the room; John and Dean slept in. The plan was to leave for Denver by 2 pm.

Sam got up early, but there was no place to run or exercise, so he got dressed and wandered around the neighborhood, looking for ways he could help. Cleared debris off of sidewalks and driveways, raked lawns, swept broken glass, and boarded up windows. Refused to take any money, but did score sandwiches, potato salad, a chocolate layer cake, a half-dozen oranges, and a six-pack of Coors for the trip west.

Sam dropped off his loot at the shared motel room without disturbing the salt lines.

The portable silver and iron sigils would ward off any intruder from any direction, 360 degrees, when hung and place correctly. Salt lines, to be honest, were becoming more of a formality as Dean and Sam become more confident about their effectiveness, particularly when it came to protecting small spaces. But John insisted. Belt and suspenders.
Sam stood and watched Dean sleep for what he was sure was only a minute or three, and then left quietly. Outside the motel room he softly chanted an extra locking spell on the door. Sam loved the Latin; it was, in effect, one of Ovid’s love verses.

Magic is mostly ritual and intention, Pastor Jim had taught him, many years before.

Dean was not the only Winchester brother who had learned to successfully feign unconsciousness when it was to his advantage. Waited until his brother left, cut and ate a sizeable piece of the homemade cake, thick with fudge frosting, with what was now his brother’s Bowie knife, and started a lengthy shower with Sammy’s soap and shampoo.

Nice way to wake up.

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Sam walked back to the bar for takeout coffee and donuts to bring back to the motel and fuel his family for the drive. Chatted with Edna who already had returned for her day shift.

“Moms never have to sleep,” she said, when Sam expressed surprise seeing her so soon.

Her husband Ralph, the Topeka cop, finally ended his 24-hour shift and joined his wife and the tall boy for breakfast. (Edna was a sucker for strays.) He shared with his wife and Sam how recovery efforts were going. He had seen the remains of the fire near Perry Lake and the bones of what Sam knew to be the witches. Said it was curious that they found the burnt out cars of most of those stupid turkey hunters, but not all, and no remains, nothing. Maybe they got out after all and took off before they could be arrested.

Ralph had the competent cop’s intuition about Sam. The teenager asked too many knowledgeable questions about the fire, and if there had been an ongoing arson investigation, he would have hauled the kid in for questioning. But Sam distracted him by confessing to an interest in police work, how he been on a couple of ride-alongs in the day, and how his father, a former Marine MP, had taught him and his brother a few things about criminal investigation.

Ralph was not 100% satisfied, but had bigger fish to fry. Kissed Edna and headed home to sleep.

Sam went back to the motel with the grande travel cups of black coffees (two for each Winchester) and plain cake donuts. The basics. First knocked on his father’s door. No answer, so he went back to the room he shared with Dean. Dean had already eaten a fourth of the cake and a sandwich. Welcomed the coffee and donuts. Hair was still damp from the shower.

Sam smelled his expensive sandalwood soap and shampoo, but said not a word. But he did shake his head in disbelief as he watched his older brother eat two donuts in rapid succession.

The youngest Hunter headed for the shower, hoping Dean left some hot water somewhere in the greater Topeka metroplex's public works system. It was noon, and in an hour or so, if John wasn’t awake yet, they would be getting him up and ready to go.

And Sam knew there was going to be a long conversation between him and Dean on the road to Colorado.
Like many fic folks, I found what I intended to be a short transition paragraph grew on its own. Made this its own chapter. Some clues as to Dean and Sam's frame of mind. Next chapter: resolution. And then the epilogue.

Thanks again for the kudos and comments–very much appreciated. Always interested in your ideas.
John

Chapter Summary

This story is about Sam and Dean, so it is easy to forget about John. Take him for granted. In the same way that Sam was motivated by more than a desire for the apple pie life, John was motivated by more than revenge.

Oh, and he knew about the bond.

Chapter Notes

John popped up and demanded more of a voice in this story. What could I say?

Notice that I don't mention the Talismen--the formal and informal Hunter underground--in this chapter. Because it is John-centric, I go with John's construct of the world, which is that he and his boys are forced to battle evil alone, except for the occasional assist from a fellow Hunter, and that civilians are fragile and clueless. (Heaved martyred sigh. Rolled eyes.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Topeka, Kansas - 2001

Anger is a powerful emotion, as is revenge. And so are fear and guilt.

What has been hinted at in the canonical stories about the Winchester family history, but never said out loud, is that before the house fire John was a drinker--weighing in at a six-pack per night plus--which was the catalyst for ongoing conflicts between husband and wife.

After Mary had gone to bed that fateful evening, John had not so much fallen asleep as passed out in front of the television. Consequently, even after the psychic Missouri turned on the light and showed him the existence of the Supernatural world and the real monsters under the bed, the bereaved husband and father still believed that he was responsible for his wife’s death.

His guilty conscience led him to live a vigilante life that seesawed between righteous justice and cloying self-pity. Two Johns emerged: the focused, competent Hunter, intelligent and brave and respected--as long as he was working a case--and, as soon as the hunt was over, the narcissistic alcoholic, bitter and in denial, as most drunks are.

For example, he believed that he was a good father because he taught his boys how to take down monsters that most people thought were characters in folk tales, the ones scribes like Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm recorded to terrify children into moral obedience. (Study the unabridged originals. Dark stuff that will haunt you.)

John told himself that he showed devotion when he took his sons on the road rather than drop them off with Millie Winchester--his mother and their grandmother. (Really, John?) Ever wonder about
Millie, who the canon hints was and maybe is still alive? John had left her behind in Maine when he enlisted in the Marines. He missed his father Henry terribly and decided that his disappearance (when Henry time-traveled to escape Abaddon and hunt for John) was her fault.

Of course he did.

But, his children loved him with good reason. He hunted things and saved lives.

John never beat his boys, contrary to some stories, but he exploited them, using the same seductive cocktail of emotions that has recruited many vulnerable children to join an army, pick up a weapon, and fight a war.

He was a hero to his sons, even when he would forget about them for days, leaving them to starve alone, if it hadn’t been for Dean and Hunters like Bobby and Pastor Jim and a benevolent army of kind, anonymous people who watched over the boys as best they could.

How many store clerks turned a blind eye to a little boy with sun-bleached brown hair in sore need of a haircut, stealing a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter, hand-in-hand with a toddler with hazel eyes? Or what does the World, saved time and again by Dean and Sam, owe the 24-hour truck stop servers, the ones with the creative excuses about why breakfast was free or that there was a twofer on pancakes or burgers or pie?

See that kid counting out pennies on the counter of the failing diner, wanting to buy one small glass of milk, please, for his younger brother? The owner, who had personal reasons not to trust the local Child Protective Services with such pretty boys, scooped out cups of homemade soup, something with potatoes and cream, and cheesy crackers, and sandwiches, chicken salad on white toast, and two large glasses of milk, thank you very much.

She had her cousin watch the cash register, and she walked the children across the highway to the half-vacant motel on the edge of town, bone-yellow in the Texas sun. Checked out the room. Stared at the salt lines and the curious symbols, wrought in silver and iron, hanging from the windows. One double bed. The pile of candy wrappers from the vending machine piled on the floor in a corner. The air conditioning and the tv were broken, but there was a couple of coloring books and a pile of magazines apparently fished out of waste paper baskets outside of convenience stores.

The big army duffle bag on the floor. Belonged to their father. It was zipped up and locked. The boys’ possessions spilled out of a couple of small gym bags. Not much.

“Daddy’s coming back today,” said the older boy, maybe eight. Dean and Sammy. The younger boy did not speak.

She came back three times a day for a week with meals and stacks of library books, which both boys devoured. Bullied the motel owner into fixing the AC and the television and had him drag in a little refrigerator. She lied and said the boys belonged to a cousin who worked in one of the nearby oil fields.

Called around to some friends and brought a bag full of kids’ clothes that she had washed and folded. Most of them fit – shirts and pants, socks and underwear. Sammy hugged Dean and asked if it was Christmas, then hugged her.

One day she looked out the big picture window of her diner and saw a black monster of a car idling out in front of the motel. While a man–she assumed he was the phantom father–carried their few possessions from the room, Sammy clambered into the back seat. Felt a tug at her heart.
Dean and his father seemed to be arguing. She tensed up and felt for the loaded Remington Deer Slayer under the counter. Flashed on a life with the boys, loving them, taking care of them.

The father handed his older son something from a wallet he pulled from his back pocket, and Dean sprinted across the empty highway to the diner. Burst in the door and ran up to the woman, waving what turned out to be a twenty dollar bill. It was well-traveled, with a suspicious-looking stain, color of spent chewing tobacco, darkening one edge.

Dean held it out to her.

“Thank you,” he said. “My father says thank you.”

She took the money, looked at it, and shook her head. Knelt in front of the boy, out of sight of the father who was squinting at the diner.

“This is a gift for Sammy,” she said, folding the bill in quarters and tucking it into the front pocket of the boy’s new third-hand jeans. Just a little worn at the knees. Her next-door neighbor had four boys, the youngest in junior high. They grow so fast.


She engulfed him in a hug and inhaled the sweet musk of clean boy.

“Tell your father he’s welcome.”

Two weeks later John abandoned his children in Arkansas with enough money for three days. Gone for six. The extra cash bought Sammy a pile of fresh fruit and a bag of blueberry muffins. He refused to eat anything until Dean agreed to share the bounty.

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John forgot, every time, about those people who helped the boys. Thanks to them, the family business worked, after its own broken fashion, until it stopped working for Sam.

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Sometimes, the pendulum paused: those brief, still moments of lucidity, between breath and heartbeat, when the world stops, when a sniper pulls the trigger because everything is steady and clear, and when John would see the world without the haze of alcohol or the drive for retribution and penance to wash away his shame, without fear or anger or grief or pain.

Pastor Jim would have described these moments as places of peace and self-acceptance, understanding and truth. What Adept Martin Buber described in his book, *I-Thou*. When the Veil is lifted between worlds.

This time, in the Topeka bar, John allowed himself to *see* his Dean and his Sam, to allow himself a little pride in what they had become and what he, perhaps, contributed.

Is there higher praise than to tell someone they are a good person doing good work? Someone to be counted on? His boys. Strong. Good. Beautiful.

Healthy young animals play when they feel safe. That night, John watched Dean and Sam play. Silly contests that no one ever wins or loses. Who can blow the paper wrapper off a straw the farthest? Who can build the tallest tower of French fries, can chant a Latin unbinding spell,
backwards, the fastest? Who can hold a handstand the longest, one-handed?

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When conditions are perfect, the Northern Lights appear, the dance of the Aurora Borealis, shimmering in waves from horizon to horizon. Unexpected beauty, to take your breath away.

John would see the ghostly flares when his hunts took him to the isolated wilds of northern-tier states and into Canada, away from the obscuring lights of civilization.

The Lore of dozens of cultures and tribes worldwide logged many myths about their origins, but Sam would say that the lights were one of those uncommon natural phenomena that were pure Science, not Magic.

In those rare moments when John was between hunts and sober and aware, and when his boys were happy, he would think he could see their shared soul bond, a broad ribbon of light, twisting around them and through them, dissolving and reappearing, exactly like those glowing curtains of green and red and gold, which he preferred to think were dragons, good and evil, at war in the sky, as did many ancient Chinese peoples.

Yes, John knew about the soul bond, in moments of clarity. But he was in denial regarding what form the bond would take as his sons grew into manhood.

Later, drunk and afraid or sober and focused on the next case, which was 99% of the time, John would forget. He went blind yet again and could not perceive what the rest of the world could see. Which is why conventional wisdom, always a little bit right and a little bit wrong, thought the senior Winchester was maybe the only person on the planet and beyond who didn’t know.

But, right now, over a plate of ribs, he saw the proof of Dean and Sam's celestial covenant.

The glances. The ability to communicate instantly without a word, up to and including catching a tossed weapon or a bottle of beer without even looking up.

Every time the brothers touched John would have sworn that he could see the bond bloom and grow. And his sons seem to find so many reasons to touch that night.

The different ways that Dean brushed Sam’s long hair away from his eyes. How Sam wiped ketchup from Dean’s cheek with his thumb and then licked it off. Not to waste it, of course.

How they would bat at each other like kittens, just for an excuse to connect. The casual hugs and squeezes. The hand left to rest on a shoulder or wrist or thigh. Forgotten for a time. Lifted, moved, but eventually, finding its way home again.

Leaning into the warmth of muscle and the flush of good alcohol and better hot sauce. That’s where those rosy cheeks, the high color came from, of course, just beer and shots and smoky ground chipotles in the dry rib rub. Maybe the bar was getting hotter, that’s all.

Sam disappeared with the pretty waitress, and John scrutinized the look on Dean’s face as he would the physical evidence in a case. Other people might have assumed every emotion from a smirk of appreciation to the angst of brotherly envy. John saw Dean’s terror at the possibility of losing his brother.

If he could remember before they left for Denver the next day, he and Sam and Dean would have a Talk.
I have seen the Aurora Borealis in Vermont and New York State. Quite extraordinary. I think they really are dragons.
Dean has it right. Almost. Maybe.

Dean was puzzled, but Hunters don’t stay puzzled for long. They worry a problem the way a rat terrier worries its prey to death. And a rat terrier is a killing machine.

Chapter Notes

Smart, well-intended people who love each other can get it wrong for years.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Topeka, Kansas – 2001

Now that the Black Coven was destroyed, Sam appeared to be happy and stable, and John was tucked into a snugly warded motel room—snoring away his hangover the day after their family’s raucous celebration—Dean’s brain was cooling down to a low simmer. He was no longer in the Flight, Hide, or Fight mode that tended to narrow his attention during an active case to the width of the cutting edge of a samurai blade.

His early-rising sibling had left their room that morning to stretch his legs, or so Big Brother assumed; Dean woke up on his own timetable. Found the bounty of food Sam had been gifted by the grateful neighbors he had helped. Cake, in a pinch, made an excellent late morning breakfast, and the sandwich was very good.

Now Dean was at leisure to ponder the puzzle of his Sammy while showering at length with the younger hunter’s soap and shampoo and surrounding himself with his brother’s sweet, woody sandalwood scent. Better than average water pressure pounded the remaining dredges of alcohol out of his brain and reduced his muscles to pudding.

Starting with their shared night in the enchanted attic, Sammy’s breakdowns after his nightmare and on the road, and Dean’s revelations about his baby brother’s transformation into an adult and need to attend college, Dean felt as if he was standing on the side of a mountain next to a melting glacier, watching creeks and streams, fed by fresh melt, converge and create a powerful new river, already threatening to flood its banks.

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The Big Picture? The last 48 hours were two of the best days of Dean’s life. The Hunter community, led by his father, had pulled off an awesome victory against the Dark Magicks. Saved thousands of lives. Although John kept them away from the main event, he and Sammy had front row seats.

And then, once John had returned from the hunt, he was no longer Drill Sargent Dad. And he
didn’t flip into Crazy Dad or Angry Dad or Comatose Drunk Dad. Or Absent Dad. He was Dad. And even up to the moment when he finally succumbed to the Winchester’s version of social drinking and fell asleep in the booth at the mighty fine BBQ bar, he apparently was enjoying his time with his sons. Engaged. Smiling. Nice.

And Sammy?

Although he had said nothing for much of the trip to Kansas after the truck stop in southern Illinois, Sammy, that is Sam, had slowly thawed. Soon they had driven past the familiar landmarks of Lawrence and into Topeka, and the brothers were talking to each other. When they sat with John to learn about the amethyst pendant and the plan for the raid, they talked. When they had gone back to their motel room to grab some shuteye and prepare for the main event, they talked before they kicked off their shoes, toppled into their respective beds and slept, deeply, dreamless, until the alarm went off.

But the talking was about logistics and sigils and weather lore and snacks and what would happen next if the Hunters failed. (John was never mentioned by name.) Nothing about higher education or nightmares or Sam’s meltdown in Baby.

By the time the brothers returned to their father’s motel room to see him off, Sam seemed completely recovered from his weird scaredy-cat reaction to Dean’s idea, which still seemed to Dean to contain nothing substantial that could have upset Sam.

(Note to self, maybe it was something else that frightened my normally rational and fearless younger brother? And I keep thinking that the nightmare in the attic is connected, somehow, to what happened in Illinois.)

They stood side-by-side as John drove away in the truck and watched through the window of John’s motel room as the other Hunters followed at random intervals towards the rendezvous point in Perry.

Then, back in their room, Sam was focused, laser bright, on the hunt, on his old-school foldout paper map, familiar yellow marker in hand, and on the computerized displays on the television. And he was talking normally, or what was normal for Sam. Nerding out on the weather reports, which was to be expected. And when Dean asked for help understanding what the scared-looking scientists and reporters were talking about, Sam went into teacher mode: serious, but smiling. Wasn’t skittish or avoiding Dean, wasn’t pouting or lost in himself.

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As Dean poured a fat dollop of Sam’s shampoo into his hand, he rappelled down his current, favorite rabbit hole and plunged into the daydreams of his potential future with Sam.

On the road, Sam would study until the time came when he would live on a college campus. Not so different from research for cases. And Dean could learn to study the books Sam was reading. Dean liked books on Lore and stories about battles and articles about fixing cars and guns. Maybe he would learn to like the books Sam liked. And maybe, until Sam enrolled fulltime, Dean could take online classes, too, and Sam could help him.

They would find diners with comfy booths and bottomless cups of good coffee and maybe donuts. (Pie would be a given.) Sam liked fresh donuts. And Sam would boss him around and smile at him. They would laugh, and the waitress would want to see what they were doing, and Sam would brag about his smart brother Dean and how they were studying together. Maybe mathematics. Or
history. Or something to do with the law. And the server would be so impressed she would bring them thick slices of homemade apple pie served with what New Englanders called rat cheese: well-aged sharp cheddar. Maybe melted on top. On the house for the smart college boys in the corner booth.

And if Sam did decide to settle in at some college, maybe they could go back to Spruce Mountain. Had this cool hands-on approach. The idea that Dean could play around with old-school iron-working tools in a traditional forge was very appealing. Dean knew enough about the Lore of Vulcan and Wayland Smith to appreciate that Smiths, whether they were Gods, Dwarves, Elves, or humans, were Mages of the highest order. They crafted potent weapons in the battle against dark monsters and evil forces: legendary swords and rings, infused with magic, and potent weapons and wards like the pendant and the silver and iron sigils that protected Hunters on the road.

Kinda the same as John and Bobby and their cars, in another life.

Warm contentment washed over Dean, like the seemingly unending supply of hot water sluicing over his body.

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So, back to the puzzle: What had happened to his Sam?

When John returned from Perry Lake, rattled but safe, the teenager looked as if a key had been turned and something important had been unlocked. At first, Dean thought it was his brother’s relief at seeing his father apparently unharmed by the ordeal. But what Dean realized was that the changes he saw in Sam were much more than the high fives after a successful case. It was as if his real Sam had been hidden away from the light, looking at the world through barred windows. His brother looked like a freed man. Wow.

Dean didn’t realize that Sam had been living in a prison, but thinking back, it was obvious. How had he walked, talked, stood, gestured—for years. Dean could not see the walls until they was gone.

Sam was no longer guarded in his actions and words. He looked and acted bigger, more expansive, taking up more room, a little louder.

Even through the serious business of building the funeral pyres, cleaning and wrapping the bodies, and saying words over the souls of the four dead Hunters, wishing them a speedy journey to Heaven, or Valhalla, or Avalon, or the Elysian Fields, or Fólkvangr or the Veil, or wherever…the Winchesters, at that point in their careers, were a little vague regarding the Hero’s Afterlife…Sam was more confident. Did not wait for orders from John and Dean, but took the initiative and expressed his opinions. John and Dean listened and deferred to the younger Hunter more often than not.

And, once the sad work of saying good-bye was over, Sam was smiling, all the time.

Curiously, Dean felt the same way. Something had changed for him as well, and he had the sense that he also had been a captive, standing in front of a door that he didn’t know existed. Now it was unlocked and open. All he had to do was walk through. He had no idea what he would find. It was scary, but in a good way.

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Once, on a trip to Denver when they were 12 and 16, Sam had dragged Dean to a dog park just so he could watch the pups play. Dean admitted it was fun to see so much furry, four-footed,
unbridled joy, unselfconscious silliness, and strength and speed launched across grass and gravel like balls from a batting machine.

Sam, at the BBQ bar, was almost six feet of happy happy dog. Hands in motion, affectionate, finding reasons to touch his brother, bump shoulders, push and pull, feeding him fries and pieces of smoky pork and chicken by hand—“Good doggie!”—fingertips brushing his lips.

Fancy one-handed catches of everything from shot glasses to steak knives, showing off patented Samuel Winchester anti-gravitational coordination, similar to that of a nationally ranked border collie flipping in mid-air before catching the Frisbee: upside-down.


Fussbudgeting like a favorite aunt, pouring out cold beer from an icy pitcher to keep their glasses filled and insisting that both brother and father drink plenty of water. Hydrate, he would scold, and John and Dean would laugh at his earnestness.

Stripped down to a tight t-shirt, catching the eye of everyone in the bar over the age of puberty and who had a pulse. Dean was used to the attention his emerald eyes and perfect jawline attracted, but only could stare, speechless, when Bethany the waitress walked Sam out of the bar.

Something inside him wanted to keep Sam to himself. Wanted to be with him, to hunt together and eat good cheeseburgers and watch old movies and spar and con rich kids in bars out of their hard-earned (snort) allowances.

And then fill the old cooler with soda and beer and stow it in Baby’s back seat, stick a pin in a map, and drive, with Sam sitting shotgun, Dean’s favorite soundtrack singing a sweet duet with the Impala’s roar.

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There was a shift in the temperature in the shower. Time to towel down.

Once again, he circled back to the same concerns. Did Sam’s transformation during the last 48 hours have anything to do with his nightmare in Vermont? His bizarre response to Dean’s modest proposal in Illinois? Something was scratching at the back of Dean’s brain. There was something he wasn’t seeing.

What if, thought Dean—even though it seemed farfetched, but what about their lives was not improbable—he and Sam had been cursed on a hunt, maybe even years ago, and maybe exposure to the pendant was enough to undo the curse? Maybe the curse was what had caused the nightmare and meltdown? Something benign, because it didn’t seem to affect their health, but enough to worry them subconsciously? Maybe...hey, maybe it had been affecting Dad as well, which why everyone was happy last night? Dad, if his description of the scene at Perry Lake was accurate, and when were his reports not spot on, was at Ground Zero for the pendant’s explosive magic.

Maybe...maybe...things would be different...better...for all three of them.

So, we are talking years ago. Around the time Sam was Sammy and was secretive for a while...11?...12...but isn’t that just normal preteen behavior? Hell, he had kept secrets when he was that age, except when he needed help and went to Bobby. Bobby. If little Sammy had decided not to come to Dean, who was just a kid himself, he probably went to Bobby.

Bobby will know.
Dean was out of the shower and dressed in time to greet his brother, who was bearing donuts and
coffee from the bar. He smirked, knowing Sam would know he had “borrowed” his soap and
shampoo and ravaged the cake.

But Sam just shook his head as Dean stuffed two donuts in his face, just for the fun of mock-
annoying his younger brother. It’s what loving big brothers do.

Sam stripped as he made his way towards the bathroom, kicking off his shoes and pulling off his
socks, his plaid flannel, and basic-t and tossing them on his bed next to his duffle bag. He was
bare-chested, in old jeans, and why did it seem as if he was glowing, just a bit, like in the dream
Dean had in Vermont about wildflower meadows and clear pine?

Little brother looked golden, in every sense of the worth. Dean could not stop staring. The kid
looked so beautiful it brought tears to his eyes.

Sam either didn’t notice, or, because he noticed everything, he ignored the chick flick moment and
grinned. And damn if his boy didn’t co-opt his big brother’s patented Dean grin. Except Dean
would swear that those perfect teeth sparkled and those hazel eyes twinkled amber and moss and
those dimples did something to him that he really did not want to think about.

Sam yanked off his jeans, leaving on his old boxers and grabbed his soap and shampoo, which
Dean had left on the side table between the beds. Smiled at Dean and winked, and closed the door
to the Winchester sanctum. (Hoping there still was hot water, given Dean probably had been
draining the Kansas River for hours.)

Dean was puzzled, but Hunters don’t stay puzzled for long. They worry a problem the way a rat
terrier worries its prey to death. And a rat terrier is a killing machine.

Just then there was a sharp knock at the door, and John entered the small motel room. He had the
duffle from the truck and the hemp bag. He looked around. The door had not been locked. The salt
line was scuffed open, there were only a couple of sigils hung in place, dirty clothes were piled in
the corners and on the bed, and neither bed was made. Both of his sons’ duffle bags had ended up
on Sam’s bed, side by side, open, with clothing and weapons in disarray. In the corner was the
black leather weapons bag, the one Dean had packed…just in case.

Dean had piled Sam's hoard of food on his bed, except for the coffee and donuts from the bar,
which were sitting on the side table. Not much room for two big men, let alone three.

Dean had stood attention when he heard the knock and was waiting for the fallout from John’s
informal inspection.

And John smiled. Shook his head just like Sam had in response to Dean's demonstration with the
donuts.

“Got a donut and coffee for me, kiddo?” he asked.

Yes, thought Dean, White Magic was at work.
Next chapter is called Sam, but the subtitle is The Winchester Way. I promised two endings, one bittersweet (the climax) and one happy (the final resolution), so you might want to stock up on tissues and celebratory beverages.

Have three timestamps ready to go. Stuff that got written that was just...too much.

Thanks again for all of the nice comments and kudos.
Sam: Part One – Tipping Point

Chapter Summary

Sam's point of view

Chapter Notes

I tried to sew together the time-space continuum correctly, but I keep finding places where I misplaced hours, days, and years.

Promised you two endings: bittersweet and happy. This chapter was going to be endless, so decided to chop it up into more digestible bits.

Became fascinated with how Sam rationalized his choices. Despite their smarts and years of experience, it is sometimes easy to forget these are kids.

Cecilia: Palo Alto, California – 2001

The story buzzing across the Bay Area Children’s Protection Agency’s grapevine was that Cecilia, their toughest and most obsessive investigator, was taking the day off. Actually, the entire week, according to the department’s assistant manager, who was in charge of keeping track of shifts, vacations, and office gossip. The agency’s resident class clown, a more-than-competent social worker with a foul mouth and a stereotypical heart of gold, posted a notice complete with artwork on the bulletin board in the agency’s break room, warning staffers that Hell, indeed, was freezing over.

(Meanwhile, in the Real Hell, several high-level demons were noting the reason behind the woman’s sudden decision to make a small dent in over a decade’s worth of unused vacation days, sick leave, and personal time.

The ringing phone had interrupted Cecilia’s early dinner around 6 pm Pacific Time. The caller had known she would be home, chewing down two microwaved, melted American cheese sandwiches on generic white bread and a pint of a plausible-tasting, house brand butter pecan ice cream. While her favorite radio soundtrack of bluegrass and country and western played—a legacy of her Kentucky childhood—she would be plowing through the mounds of paperwork on her dining room table as she did every night, removing a few file folders that would be replaced by the next evening as new cases were added to the piles.

Cecilia had checked the caller id on the display, a necessary precaution in her type of work. Angry parents, drugged up ex-cons, psychotic kids looking for revenge. Sometimes, it was hard to tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys.

The name had been a familiar alias, calling from an unfamiliar number.

“Sam?”
She knew that he was coming to Palo Alto in early August, just a few weeks away. Was going to stay with her until his dorm assignment was settled, and he had sworn that even after he moved on campus that he would, at the least, come over for Sunday night dinners.

“Cecilia.” The voice on the line had sounded heartbroken.

She had inhaled sharply and closed her eyes, holding the receiver against her ear.

“What happened, sweetheart?” she had breathed into the phone.

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Sam: The Midwest and the Heartland – 2001

72 hours before, more or less, and counting

Dean’s awkward speech in the truck spot parking lot in Illinois, all about his Big Plan to help his favorite genius brother secure some kind of college education, would have been endearing under different circumstances.

Sam knew that Dean loved him and wanted, no, needed to take care of him and ensure he was happy. But Sam was numb with shame and guilt even after he realized that his older brother hadn’t yet figured out about Stanford and Sam’s years of deceit.

Sam also knew his brother was hurt by his current mute rejection. And Dean was going to hurt more. And it would be Sam’s fault.

He sat next to Dean, mile after mile on the way to Topeka, in the familiar embrace of Baby’s loud purr. Dean mostly quiet, but sweetly solicitous. Buying Sam’s favorite road treats including movie candy from their childhood. Taking care of the more tedious chores of road trips, like squeegeeing insects from Baby’s windshield and headlights. Hauling heavy bags of road salt and positioning them in her spacious trunk above the false bottom that hid the tools of the Hunter’s trade. Bringing him tea with honey without being asked and without stupid Big Brother comments.

Half a dozen times Sam could sense Dean shifting in his seat, inhaling, exhaling. Out of the corner of his eye each time he could see his brother chewing his lower lip. (They couldn’t play poker with each other anymore; knew each other’s tells too well.) He knew Dean wanted to ask what. And why. But the older Hunter apparently decided to wait until they arrived in Topeka.

Dean tried to initiate small talk about the upcoming case, the storm clouds swelling above the horizon as they drove west, and pass me another soda, buddy. But he finally gave up. Most of the trip was spent in silence. Sitting in the Impala next to his brother Sam flashed on memories of a dozen hospital waiting rooms and hanging around for news about his brother or father. Felt the same—sitting, eating snacks, looking out the window, and dreading what the future might bring.

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Meanwhile, Sam had his speech prepared for when the time for the Reveal was just right. About how he was not abandoning his family (Dean and John), the Family Business (killing monsters), or the Family Cause, which was tracking down the Thing that killed Mary.

How he could do more good pursuing his own Long Game. Four years, maybe only three, for the bachelor’s degree, three more for law school, and then after graduation he would be helping with real money almost immediately; the placement rate for Stanford law school graduates was awesome, like guaranteed six figures out of the gate. No more financing hunts with credit card
scams and roadhouse hustles. No more crappy motels. Plenty of hot water, fluffy towels, and clean sheets every night. Three squares every day. And decent coffee a given.

He even plotted out a chart to show the relationship between the total amount of time he would spend in school and his earning power afterwards. He was going to make a poster with a grid and color arrows. Seriously. When his brother and father would see the amount of legitimate cash he could score in the first five years after school, well, that would silence most of their concerns. He was certain. He thought facts would be enough.

And it wasn’t like he was going to be moving to a different planet. Plenty of work on the west coast for Hunters, and did he mention the awesome libraries at Stanford? And the professors with world-class expertise in ancient languages and chemistry and pre-literate tribal cultures?

And New Age white witches were everywhere in California. Although Bobby and John and their generation of Hunters found them incredibly annoying, the leftovers from the tie-dyed era were pretty good at whipping up effective but benign healing salves and cleansing spells. Happy to mix and package the ingredients for the more common charms and protective hex bags.

And there was this one Bay Area witch he met through Cecilia during his interview visit who had a coffee shop and bakery that specialized in fruit cobblers. They were like pies, he’d explain to a skeptical Dean, except baked in little casserole dishes called ramekins, which made it easier to mix in the optional double scoops of vanilla bean ice cream melting on the top of the hot from the oven pastries.

And California also was home to awesome green chili cheeseburgers! And deep-fried giant onion blossoms! And very good pizza! Sam had written a novella of California culinary highlights for Dean. He had to make him understand. Sam was counting on frequent visits from his older brother.

And Sam could expand their knowledge of the world’s Lore, even for elder statesmen Hunters like Bobby and Pastor Jim and Rufus. And his father. Sam would have legitimate access to some of the best libraries in the world without having to hack passwords and firewalls. Be able to hop on a plane from the San Francisco airport. Connect with Hunters in other parts of the world, even. Bring back souvenirs for his earth-bound brother. Dean sure doted on his t-shirt collection.

Yes, attending one of the best universities in the world would be intense. But Sam still would be involved in hunts. He’d help. He’d research and work simpler cases. There were weekends and vacations and those pauses between semesters.

And he really didn’t think that law school, even at Stanford, would be quite as rigorous as the Hunter Academy that he had been attending since he was eight years old.

Ten years of training as a warrior. It had been sort of like law school. But a law school where he studied the Law, aka the Lore, in a dozen ancient languages and completed the equivalent of a Marine Corps boot camp at the same time, and the drill sergeants were his relentless Dad and older brother. And he had worked within the equivalent of an unforgiving judicial system where every case and trial carried a potential death sentence for the entire courtroom, including the lawyers.

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But, he wasn’t ready for That Talk; he had, or so he had rationalized (And who could tell the difference?) several legitimate reasons for waiting.

First, he certainly wasn’t going to ask for a family meeting before what might turn out to be the biggest hunt of their lives; his issues would at best serve as an unwanted distraction while his father
and fellow Hunters, with the support of dozens of Talismen and Adepts, were preventing the mass
destruction of the American Midwest.

And there was no way he was going to tell Dean and John on his own. Bobby and Pastor Jim
promised to be there. Rufus, who for some reason had a strong dislike of John, had offered to come
along and be the designated driver, sitting out front of whatever ratty motel they ended up at in
Sam’s getaway car of choice.

“You’ll need a topnotch wheelman, boy,” he groused, and then gave Sam a one-armed hug.

The crotchety Hunter secretly adored both boys. That’s the truth, if not the canon.

And, of greatest importance, Sam wanted to spend as much time as he could with his father and
brother in the coming weeks with their being free of the burden of knowing about his move to Palo
Alto.

He wanted the sweat and scary of a Winchester-style training session one more time. Like when
the brothers would stand, shoulder to shoulder (more than a metaphor in recent months), side by
side at a rural shooting range, picking off empty beer cans lined up on hay bales, quick fire, taking
turns without a pause. (Not allowed to rapid fire in most inside ranges).

Then, they would take turns shooting blindfolded.

(You memorize the position of the beer cans; have your brother tie the scarf over your eyes. Tight.
Then he spins you around maybe 20 times, and then aims you at the cans. Yeah, like that’s not
dangerous.)

Years of syncing their responses to make-believe deadly enemies so that in the field, when there
was no time to think, muscle memory would take over. Quick fire, taking turns.

Enabling both young Hunters to orient themselves instantly in a dark cellar filled with screams and
the sound of shotguns firing salt cartridges through ectoplasm and artifacts burning as the lighter
fluid ignites. Maybe they’d be dizzy from being thrown, once more, up against a wall by a
manifested spirit. But still able to aim and fire with a steady hand. Or, in Sam’ case, throw a silver
blade with pinpoint accuracy into the monster equivalent of a critical artery, even while the room
was spinning.

Sam also wanted a last summer in the Impala, to see Dean smiling behind the wheel and to listen to
his corny jokes, the same ones he’d been telling since they were little guys together, because for all
of his being a badass Hunter, his older brother was a kid.

Do the stuff they would get away with when Dad wasn’t around. Bumping knees under a diner
table, trying to distract the other Winchester, make him spill his drink. Tripping him when he gets
up to go to the john. Salting a milk shake. Dumb stuff.

At night, long talks in the dark motel room about everything. Listening to Dean’s deep voice,
sounding even deeper in the dark, tell stories that he made up from bits of Lore. Tall tales, like the
time he claimed that he shot his last remaining silver bullet between two werewolves, then threw a
Bowie knife, which split the bullet in half and sent the two pieces skidding through the air
sideways into the brains of the approaching monsters. Dropped them in their tracks. Perfectly.

Yeah. Right Dean.
Sam: Part Two – Soul Bonds

Chapter Summary

Sam's in love.

Dean has moved from oblivion to denial.

And Sam needs to make an alteration to his plan.

History

Most of all, before he left for California, Sam wanted those remaining nights with Dean.

When Sammy was a toddler and old enough to share the back of the Impala with his head in Dean’s lap, or in a single motel bed, the brothers would hold onto each other like sleepy kittens. When Sam entered puberty, which was like a drop off of a cliff into a canyon with no bottom–Falling or flying, what’s the difference?–he became uneasy about the changing ways he felt about Dean. He stopped that thing they did, the sweet, silent comfort, chaste but affectionate. Decided on his own that it was best that they both move on. Grow up. Grow apart, the way brothers often do. Prepare to live their lives separately. Eventually. Inevitably. Sam a lawyer. Dean a Hunter.

Never discussed his concerns or choices with his brother. Sam was no longer available, except for stolen touches, masked in denial. (Surprised? Have you met a Winchester?) The younger brother developed the family knack for avoidance and unilateral decision-making at an early age.

But the visits to the college campuses had been giving Sam the opportunity to reflect on his relationship with his brother outside of the normal chaos of their abnormal lives. He got to spy on Dean, while Dean spied on him.

Those interludes gave Sam respite without the distraction of snarling werewolves and vampire heads rolling out of duffle bags–Dean’s idea of a prank–and 3 am sessions at 24/7 laundromats, while taking turns as the lookout for easily spooked civilians who might properly equate bloody clothes and the smell of gunpowder and rotting guts with serial killers.

Without chronic exhaustion and the boredom that follows as they waited out the next killing assignment. Like combat soldiers, alternating between terror and tedium.

Without having to spend three hours almost every day conning the money for dinner and gas and the price of a motel room. Credit card scams don’t work as well as Chuck’s stories would have you believe. Working a pervy bar hustling, well, pervs, at pool and cards and darts, knowing that the greasy creeps were playing for the excuse of brushing up against those pretty pretty boys. By accident.

Of course, after the money was pocketed, wrists were broken, knees were smashed, by accident, and a couple of very bad men learned what the lovely hazel-eyed teen with the long hair and
slender, gazelle-like legs could do with a knife.

Dean and Sam came up with a great line to whisper in the ears of those small-town predators. A Shakespearean moment, Sam decided, while holding a cut-throat razor against the soft skin high on the throat. The blade was so sharp that the men never felt the where their flesh had been scored. They would discover the bloody thin collar carved into their skin when they got home, looked in the mirror, and remembered the words.

“We all are armed. We all have blades. We all know who you are.”

The idea that they might have implanted lasting paranoia in the douchebags’ psyches, causing them to think twice before going after another young boy, made both Winchesters happy.

Sam was not a coward, regardless what the canon implied. He had not planned fleeing the Hunter’s Life because he was afraid of being physically hurt or dying. It was the emotionally destructive stress that he feared. The rollercoaster of horrors, monster and human, was changing him. Changing Dean. Maybe too late for his father.

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Always, the college library would be the center of their faux life in academe.

Except during finals week, where every table, chair, and most of the floor space was occupied by students who were simultaneously over-caffeinated and brain dead, they could find a space to park for the day. They would take turns, ultra-polite, turning up the Winchester charm to Def Con 3 on unsuspecting student work-study minions and library staffers, and seek permission to use a table, study carrel, or a tucked away corner desk. Shocked at being asked, the dazed library employee would say yes to anything they requested.

The brothers would pull a small stack of books and magazines and settle in. They both knew library protocols–no reshelving books on their own, no dog earing pages or marking up margins, and no slicing out pages or art. They might take notes to bring back to John. Like all Hunters, they had excellent penmanship; never knew who might have to decipher their scribbles.

Sam would look up from his textbook *du moment* and see Dean curled in a chair a few feet away, deeply absorbed in a gun or cooking magazine. His older brother had mastered the art of positioning himself so his back was protected by a blank wall, and he was facing the entrance of the library or the floor they were on, angled so he could see between the tall shelves and beyond to the service desks and elevators–regardless of the layout of the furniture and bookcases.

Sam realized that no matter how quiet the library was or how absorbed Dean was, apparently enthralled by articles about gun oil and homemade pancake syrup, and Dean wasn't the first person to notice that both products might use coconut oil in their formulations, his older brother was on full alert, as if guarding a precious treasure for a case.

Sam was used to his protectiveness, but noticed, not for the first time, that in the wrong situations, Dean would become possessive, even as Sam grew older, stronger, and taller. The hand on the small of his back or his shoulder. Or his knee. Or the back of his neck. The bump with a hip.

And Sam made another decision on his own. And began to bump back.

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A crow, floating in a thermal over a red rock canyon in Mesa Verde National Park, doesn’t know that the Colorado sky, an upside down cobalt glass goblet cradling a sun poured from a pitcher of
lost Aztec gold, is beautiful.

Like the air that the black bird breathes as it soars, the sky is necessary.

Sam knew abstractly that Dean was and is beautiful, because other people told him so. Sam knew for sure that Dean was necessary, like the air he breathed.

Sam considered that how he felt about his brother was how other people felt when they were in love. He decided that he didn’t care what other people thought or felt, except for Dean. He could feel the invisible ribbons of the soul bond tighten, every time they touched. How would it feel if he was in Dean’s arms at night, and he held him down and kissed him, really kissed him, even while Dean pretended to sleep in the same way Sam had pretended for years, as Dean combed through his hair with his fingers while their breathing synchronized.

Dean was no longer oblivious to the effect the bond was having on them. It was becoming easier for Sam to imagine those not-so-secret kisses happening, in the current moment while Dean was trapped in a typical Winchester twilight zone of denial. But not forever. And Sam could be patient.

And how will the bond feel when they are 1000 miles or more apart after the move? It was becoming more important to Sam that he could find ways to lure Dean to California and more than just for the occasional visit.

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Last year Sam tested a theory. The topic of soul bonds had come up during a late night bar talk about sex and partners and the fate of Hunter marriages at an anonymous roadhouse in the Florida Peninsula, with a group of Hunters with whom they joined forces to destroy a couple of vampire nests. Everyone were letting off steam. The motel where Dean had booked the family was across the street from the bar, and the Hunters had welcomed the boys. John was off somewhere.

Sam stuck with surprisingly decent orange juice; it was Florida, after all. Dean, even with his excellent Bobby Singer fake id, stayed with beer.

The conversation turned to first loves and romance and important kisses. Who knew Hunters could be such saps? The adults had the Winchester brothers as a fresh, captive audience for old stories they knew too well. Liked the boys right off. And liked to tease them, especially cocksure Dean.

One of the women looked at Sam and Dean and smiled, like she was watching a sunrise from her childhood front porch. Sam didn't respond to her fond looks. Dean felt a twinge of anxiety and drank his brews in quick succession until the room started to tilt: a sign that he needed to taper off to a couple of mugs per hour in order to be able to walk his brother back to the motel safely. Just in case a stray vampire had escaped the nest and was looking for revenge. And there were a lot of fangs in the Sunshine State; they liked the humidity and heat.

Ever-present danger was Dean’s main excuse for his staying close enough to his little brother to smell that really nice sandalwood shampoo.

Sam was relentless, asking questions with feigned innocence.

“How do you know you are in love with the right person? Can a Hunter marry a civilian? A Talismen, from that network of helpers? Have you ever worked with a Talismen? Who initiates the first kiss the first time? Is kissing a woman different from kissing a man? What about Hunter kids? What’s a Hunter marriage like? What about fighting together?”

“And what about soul bonds?” Sam asked, carefully timing his question to when his brother and
most of the crew had their glasses to their lips. The result was bratty Sammy awesomeness, even when he was drenched with the beer spray from a half-dozen pair of lips. Even though he knew Dean would kill him when they were alone in their motel room, meaning an epic tickle fight. The winner was no longer a sure bet.

The ticked off bartender/owner brought a handful of bar towels and slammed them on the wooden bar top, pitted from generations of Hunter bar games with switchblades, Bowies, and silver hunting knifes. He was used to Hunter shenanigans and didn’t mind them blowing off steam (they always covered the damage and more), but Jeez Louise.

It didn’t help Dean’s peace of mind that everyone, including his Sammy, was laughing, except him.

The woman spoke first, after signaling for another round.

“I bet you know all about soul bonds, Mr. Sam,” she said. And he blushed, as did Dean.
Sam: Part Three – Continental Drift

Chapter Summary

Sam changes his mind.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter from Sam's point of view of recent events.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Topeka, KS – 2001

In the Impala, heading to Topeka. Sam’s nimble mind was leaping and dodging, much like the African antelope for which Baby was named.

On second thought, the situation Sam faced was more like being trapped in a broken maze than bounding through an open savanna. Every potential exit was proving to be a dead end.

Dean will press on, and Sam will be forced to reveal his “I got into the toughest university program in the US with a full ride, so why are you angry?” story under duress, making it a harder sell. At this point, he was looking for a way to hold off Dean until he could tell his father and brother the whole plan at a better time and place, with him in control of the narrative. Before Dean, or worse, John, started interrogating him.

Then Dean and Sam arrived in Topeka. And everything, every thing, changed.

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The shift started with the emotional and intellectual impact the Apocalyptic-level hunt had on the entire family. The gravity of the situation took over all brain function, and nothing else mattered to the Winchesters except saving lives. All three transformed into their better selves.

To the romantic teen, his drunk, surly father became King Arthur: brilliant, confident, and the good kind of scary that made Sam want to shout proudly: Look out, here comes my dad, John Winchester!

His jokester older brother Dean became Lancelot, the noble knight and warrior, the competent soldier with the hard-won confidence of a young Army sniper.

Sam liked to think of himself as Parsifal (aka Percival), a seeker of the Holy Grail who reportedly had a natural talent for weapons.

Or, to mix his metaphors. Sam was Britt, the tall, skinny Zen knife-thrower in his favorite movie, The Magnificent Seven.

The VHS version of the movie came out when Sam was nine. He bought his own copy by earning
tips carrying groceries for old ladies at the motels where they stayed. Wanted to pay for it with “honest” money. Sam wore out the tape playing it over and over at libraries after school and at Bobby’s house.

It was one of the few movies Bobby would watch with the boys. Knights, samurai, gunslingers, Hunters...all cut from the same cloth. Which is why, by tacit agreement, they always viewed the movie in the dark so the brothers wouldn’t see Bobby cry. Every time. The old Hunter thought of himself as Bernardo, the half-breed, who looked after the little boys. Dean was Steve McQueen’s Vin Tanner, of course. And one night, when Rufus was visiting, they discovered his man crush on Yul Brynner’s Chris.

Some evenings, after a particularly difficult hunt, they watched it twice.

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And then he and Dean were introduced to the amethyst pendant, a relic of the Holy Mage Solomon’s wars with the Djinn and their evil human witch allies. Sam and his brother knew enough about the jewel’s provenance to impress John, thanks to their studying Judaic and Christian Apocrypha with Rufus and Pastor Jim. The Kabbalah, the Knights Templar, the Baal Shem Tov, the stories of Christ’s time in the Blessed Isles, and a history of miracles tied to saintly relics. Different versions of different truths.

Here he was, a kid named Sam, sitting in a motel room in Topeka, Kansas, holding in the palm of his hand one of the most powerful weapons in existence. Wow.

It was a little strange though, John’s being puzzled about giving Sam the second set of larger gloves. His father looked liked he hadn’t ever seen Sam before.

Maybe he hadn’t, thought Sam.

Then John left to confront the coven, and Sam and Dean returned to their motel room, the slightly bigger and better mini-suite Dean had booked. Sam immediately settled into Big Brain mode, studying the Weather Channel, mapping patterns regarding the trajectory of the storm and its terrifying offspring that even seasoned scientists would miss.

He profiled the meteorologists and television hosts. Who was telling the truth? Who was lying? He could see the fear hiding behind their eyes, still and black like a bottomless lake.

For the first time in a very long time, Dean and Stanford were not dominating his thoughts. Sam was consumed with the idea that the heart of the continent would be plowed up by a gang of weather monsters. He knew that a multistate mass murder would be more than possible.

Sam watched as the winds swirled faster and the storm center grew bigger, and the Weather Channel began to parade a series of guest pundits across the screen. Nobody smiled as they squinted into the cameras at their local television station or stood outside, battered by the winds pushing ahead of the main storm front.

Cloistered academics in shabby tweed suits and skewered ties, modestly wearing the title of “acknowledged expert”, explaining complex ideas as if they were lecturing a class of bright but ill-educated freshman. (Not a bad metaphor for most of the American public.) Rural sheriffs, too concerned for the safety of the people in their county to be afraid of speaking to a national audience.

Local weather gals, pretty girls schooled in pointing to maps and reading rip-and-tear reports, hired
to brighten up the evening news. Excited to be auditioning on national cable, but they were good girls. Smart. So they didn’t take advantage of their three minutes, except to ask their bosses for a tape of the segment to share with family. They stepped up, did the job, and were sent home early to help their moms and dads board up windows and sandbag the nearest river banks.

And, seasoned television meteorologists with PhDs from Ivy League universities, working for stations in smaller media markets. During World War II, thousands of trained professionals had received free degrees from the best universities and then served in the Armed Forces to help forecast the weather for battles and the movement of troops and supplies. Returning home, fresh from having immersed themselves in the newly refurbished science of meteorology, many landed part time jobs as local weathermen back in their hometowns.

If you grew up in the United States mid-century, those weathermen (mostly male in those days) you saw explaining the differences between high and low pressure systems probably spent the war sending up weather balloons and interpreting isobars.

And during the Colossus crisis, they all sensed something big was happening. They stood taller, talked slower, lost the happy patter, and stopped deferring to the idiot anchormen (also mostly male) who sometimes held their jobs only because of their sculptured jaws and resonant voices. When the national hosts figured out how smart the former military weather forecasters were in these Heartland communities, they let them talk, and engaged them in conversations that set the standard for the best of science-oriented live news coverage for many years.

In the past, crisis management bureaucrats at the county and state level had created evacuation routes and exit strategies that mostly worked. You knew what to do if you lived in the path of natural disasters such as floods, forest fires, hurricanes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions. But, Sam realized, as did most of America as the day progressed, that nobody had figured how to move millions of people under the potential genesis of dozens, even hundreds of F5 category tornadoes.

And even if there were ways to evacuate the mid-section of the country, how were officials going to convince those hearty folk who were born and bred in Tornado Alley(s) to leave hours before the tornadoes enter their zip codes? How would you argue convincingly that this storm, this Colossus, was different from anything they had experienced before? And that hanging out in the root cellar or basement rec room for an hour or so—with a battery-powered radio, a cooler full of ice and Buds, bags of chips and gringo-heat salsa, Coleman lanterns, a couple of clean decks of cards, and sleeping bags for the kids—was not going to save them this time.

But where could they flee, Sam asked himself, where the sentient whirlwinds would not or could not follow? Disabling the coven was the only hope. The unimaginable was if John and the other Hunters failed. If the amethyst pendant did not live up to its potential.

Sam felt his brain click on as if it was fitted with gears ratcheting the lens on a steampunk telescope. Superior 19th century craftsmanship, the same as shaped the black iron works they discovered in Vermont in the dormitory attic a lifetime before.

Sam tracked the storm, plotting the anomalies reported on the television with his yellow marker on his well-worn auto club foldout map. The equations he scribbled in the margins would help him and the rest of the back-up team anticipate its path through the Midwest. He pulled colored pens from his trusty school supply zippered case, hoping that some of Missouri’s psychic magic still imbued the soft leather and would rub off on him.

Maybe there was a Plan B or C in place that Sam didn’t know about yet. Some hybrid of new tech and old magic, like seeding clouds with silver and holy water from high-altitude planes or old-
fashioned prayer circles amplified via the World Wide Web might work. He knew cohorts of Adepts and Hunters across the country had been chanting rings of protective spells, which were holding back and redirecting the worst of the storm. But for how long? Maybe, there were other artifacts not as powerful as the amethyst but still able to defend against local breakouts?

He had some ideas. When they met after the storm was over–Hunters, Adepts, White Witches, Mages, Talismen, Holy Men and Women, and Scholars–to compare notes and plan for the next big crisis, he felt he could make a real contribution. His generation had been brought up with computers. Hunters like Frank and Ash (and some day his future friend Charlie) might suggest better methods for dealing with this level of danger.

Important stuff to consider. An important job. And he was doing it very well.

Meanwhile, he vaguely was aware of his brother, who was making sure Sam ate and drank, who kept the room in order, and who occasionally asked pertinent questions and made insightful comments. Sam knew that Dean was tiptoeing around him and was mistaking Sam’s absorption in the drama playing out on the television screen as the cold shoulder. And Sam did not want to take the time to explain how he felt.

But Dean’s respectful request for a translation of the science patois provided a bridge Sam easily could cross. It helped clear his mind by forcing him to reflect on and articulate the work he was doing. Nothing is better for learning something well than having to make it make sense to someone else.

Working a case with Dean made him happiest when Dean treated him like an equal partner. For the first time, Sam felt Dean was looking up to him, as he had looked up to his older brother for so many years.

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Let’s pause and remind ourselves of the scope and depth of the young Samuel Winchester’s mental capacity.

The math he was juggling in his head was equal to the abilities of the computers at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado or at the Met Office in Exeter, Devon, United Kingdom. Maybe a little better.

See, brains have that cool, intuitive, improvisational dance going for them that computers lack. Tacit knowledge. Those things we know for which we have no words.

Computers know the map; humans know the territory. Temperature and humidity plotted on a chart versus the feel of salty sweat running down your forehead and burning your eyes on a hot day. You’re squinting at home plate while standing on a pitcher’s mound in a sandlot in rural Texas in early August. The weight of the baseball in your hand and the feel of the seams as you align the stitching for a slider or curveball. The pinch of new shoes across your toes. A breath of fresh cut grass from a neighboring yard. The buzz and whack of rotary saws and hammers from a construction site across the street, where a team of cousins and brothers are quickly and skillfully assembling a replacement roof for their newlywed uncle’s remodeled house. Better kitchen, another bathroom, and space for a new generation to grow and prosper.

A witch squall blowing frozen terror into your heart is different from viewing the National Renewable Energy Laboratory’s wind resource assessment on a high-resolution computer screen: two different kinds of truths.
Some scholars who have studied Hunter lineages, particularly those of the Campbells and Winchesters, have posited that the offspring of merging Hunter kinship lines with the best pedigrees were human (which other scholars questioned with justification, as the history of the brothers ultimately demonstrated), but amplified, similar to the refinement over centuries of that elite killer, the domestic cat.

See, a cat’s brain is hooked up to state-of-the-art peripherals–eyes, whiskers, teeth, tail (for ballast and balance during the pounce), and claws. The whole package is designed to kill smaller rodents. Cats don’t do research; they Know about mice.

In other words, the best Hunters of any species are genetically tuned–whether or not on purpose has never been determined–to kill monsters and vanquish spirits.

Sort of like Parsifal and Britt.

Sam and Dean’s genes–and before that those of Mary and John–were passed down from generations of Hunters during which time they were repeatedly exposed to and mutated by the Supernatural: curses, blessings, chanted prayers, incense, rare spices and herbs, mythical weapons manifested, electromagnetic fields that might not register on ordinary detection equipment, and the Magicked biochemistry of the ichor and gore of ten thousand dead monsters, going back hundreds of years.

The result: heightened senses, enhanced reflexes (shortcuts in the wiring of neurons and synapses), and brains filled with wisdom pulled from events that they never witnessed personally. Which is why Hunters like John and Mary and Dean and Sam ended up Knowing things they hadn’t experienced in their lifetimes, never read about, never heard about. Another layer of smarts.

So Sam was not limited to book smart or never forgets anything he reads smart.

And it’s why he could have, when called upon, outthunk a Cray computer running a national government weather service.

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When those glowing purple spheres erupted from the pendant and began seeking and neutralizing the black magic that permeated and fueled the storm, and Sam realized that John and the Hunters–his family and friends–were going to win, a voice whispered in his ear.

It was neither Angel nor Demon talking to him. It was Sam enlightening Sam, his bicameral brain talking to itself.

The young Hunter realized, might we say finally, that if he were a normal teenager from a normal family, nothing would be better than the acceptance at an internationally respected university, the obtainment of a professional degree, and the launch of a high-salaried and prestigious career.

It appeared he was not normal by those standards.

His attitude regarding his place in the Hunter Life had been shifting that day and night just below his conscious awareness, sort of like a Sam Winchester version of the excruciatingly slow but unstoppable movement described by the old continental drift theory. Inches per year. Culminating in the quick, oft-violent release of energy at the fault lines along the tectonic plates.

In other words, Sam was moments away from experiencing what might be described poetically as a spiritual earthquake.
In the fanciful language that the psychic Missouri was fond of using, it was as if Sam’s Great Idea, which had directed his life since he was eleven years old, was a holy contract written in gold calligraphy on a great sheet of impossibly smooth and thin and deadly obsidian glass.

It had shattered under the pressure of the importance of the Colossus event, and Sam’s precious contract had rearranged itself into a new pattern of words.

The words Sam whispered to himself:

*Nothing will be better than this. Ever.*

The psychic Missouri would intone like a 19th century Baptist preacher at a revival meeting, when describing years later what happened:

*Veils ripped from his eyes, and chains fell from his body.*

Sam will hear a different description of how he felt that moment at a pop psychology lecture he will attend for extra credit at a symposium at Berkeley months after the event.

“When you discard self-limiting belief systems, you might experience instant conversion to a new set of beliefs and a new set of problems. There can be specific physiological symptoms. You will believe you see with greater clarity. Colors look rain-washed. You will be painfully aware of details in sight and sound and touch. You will feel reborn.”

Back in Topeka, Sam would spend the next 36 hours exploring what these newly emerged feelings and thoughts would mean.

Chapter End Notes

The farther this work progresses, the more people and authors I feel I should be acknowledging for their influence.

What Sam has experienced has been documented many times. I first learned about it from a friend who is a behavioral psychologist who had studied “cult phenomena” and what happens at the point of conversion. Also from other friends who work as psychologists and psychotherapists who have seen what can happen to a person physically and emotionally when they are "enlightened” - particularly when they solve a problem that has been haunting them for a while or make a decision that resolves a difficult issue. Some even claim that the root of many cases of clinical depression is being caught on the cusp of a difficult choice - and once the choice is made, no matter how difficult, the stress is released and the person feels better.

The description of the tv weathermen is in honor of a family member who served in the Air Force in World War II. Enlisted as a penniless young adult, applied for the meteorology program, earned a free degree at one of the best universities in the world, and after the war went on to be a degreed professional. Taught me how to identify storm fronts and the clues that warned of tornadoes in the making.
Sam is ready to tell the truth.

The outskirts of Topeka, Kansas - 2001

Sam stood in the rusty shower stall, head bowed, meditating under the better than average water pressure pounding his shoulders. His brother and father lounged on the twin beds outside the door in the small motel room, waiting to hop on Interstate 70 West to Denver and then into the high country of Colorado.

Through the thin walls he could hear his Winchester kin bickering. Whenever there was a pause in the Grand Battle Against Evil, his brother and father inevitably spiraled down into arguments about cars, food, and weapons.

Will it be worth their time to tune their vehicles to the less-forgiving altitudes of Leadville and Winter Park? Could they stay an extra day in Denver, track down a Hunter-friendly garage with an outside car wash bay, and detail the truck and Baby? Please?

Which dives on South Federal Boulevard, the cuisine hub of the West Side of the Mile-High City, will have the best Tex-Mex tacos and Vietnamese wraps and rolls? Which lower downtown brewpub will serve the best bacon cheeseburgers with strips of blackened Anaheims latticed across the top, two deep? Where will they find fresh baked apple pies with melt-in-your-mouth crusts made with lard (like they should be) with a shot of brandy in the filling?

Please, Dad, can I hold the amethyst one more time before you send it away?

An Adept courier was waiting in a nearby restaurant, eating a steak rare enough to qualify as Black Angus sushi. John was going to call She/He/It/Them over to the motel and hand off the jeweled pendant, the two of them chanting in tandem and locking it down in its protective curse box. The courier then would drive it north to Blue Earth, Minnesota. There the We-Saved-The-Western-Hemisphere artifact would rest and recharge under the pure-hearted Pastor Jim’s expert care, until the next eschatological event.

Eschatological. That’s not a word Dean or John ever used. Sam was showing off in his head. He may be a genius, but he still was a teenager. And a competitive younger brother and son.

Sam thought he might have grown another inch during the last 12 hours of celebration, his body’s response to the nonstop eating and drinking. The worn washcloth was too small to do much good. He reached a long arm out from around the shower curtain and hooked a clean hand towel from a nearby shelf.

He sighed in exasperation as he eyed his bottle of shower gel, knowing that Dean had plundered half of it just to annoy him. But, pranking was a sign that Dean was happy. It was worth the couple
of extra bucks that the good stuff cost Sam to have Dean grinning, even at his expense.

While he scrubbed the dirt and sweat off his body, the smelly remains from his morning of helping the neighborhood dig out from the storm, he evaluated his current situation.

Sam knew three things:

1. He wasn’t going to Stanford.
2. He loved Dean.
3. Dean loved him.

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First off, he wasn’t going to Stanford.

He learned in the last couple of days that what he wanted, really wanted, had been in front of him all these years: the Hunter’s Life. Saving the world with his family and friends.

He was going to tell Dean and John about the original Stanford Plan within the hour, as soon as he finished his shower and put on clean clothes, and before they left for Denver. Why he did it and how he pulled it off, how cool it was that it worked—a tribute to his training as a sneaky Hunter brought up by the sneakiest of Hunters—and why he was abandoning the Plan, which has been slow-brewing for over a decade, in exchange for staying in the Family Business. Why Dean’s scheme for combining college and hunting was a terrific idea. And doable. They would work out the details on the drive to Colorado. And he would find ways to make money to make their lives easier.

Sam already had rehearsed his speech in his head a hundred times.

Awesome, as brother Dean liked to say.

Yes, he assumed there would be fallout. There wasn’t enough time to warn Bobby and Rufus and the rest of the Hunters, Adepts, and Talismen who had helped him along the way. They would face John’s wrath, but his personal tribe of supporters knew that might happen from the start. Knew the elder Winchester could carry a grudge for years. But it was a threat they all were willing to face for the sake of the gifted boy.

The young Hunter knew John would yell and pout, at first. But, Sam’s first discovery after his decision to stay in the Hunter’s Life: When he stopped being afraid of getting caught leaving for Stanford, which had colored his life for years, there wasn’t much left to fear.

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The shower’s water stayed hot. It was the middle of the day, so Sam wasn’t competing at dawn with thrifty business travelers (the motel was a bargain AND next to a great Kansas smokehouse BBQ and bar as a bonus) spiffing up for morning meetings with state officials. Or with locals displaced by the storm and, while recovering from the party-hearty celebration from the night before, packing up early to go home and assess the damage.

Sam draped the hand towel over the shower rod, squinted, and grabbed for his shampoo. Dean and John were talking about oil changes and ghost peppers and homegrown Colorado delicacies like Palisade peaches and Olathe Sweet sweet corn (“Call it by its right name, son.”) and Rocky Ford Cantaloupe™.

That shaman with the Native American craft and jewelry store in an unassuming suburban Aurora
strip mall. The good stuff—mostly chanted objects for protection from arcane spells—was locked up and warded in the back room. Love to get his take on the Black Coven and Colossus. And, please Dad, the pendant? Won’t drop it.

Sam eavesdropped, seeing in his mind’s eye how the familiar scene was playing out. He knew John was laughing at his older boy’s exaggerated puppy eyes and pouting lips.

Sam couldn’t have stopped smiling if he tried.

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Second, yes, it was old news, but he knew he loved Dean, and he was going to tell him and show him, as much as Dean could accept, step by step. And he would not take no for an answer. No evasions, big brother, no more pretending that the soul bond was one of the psychic Missouri’s more fanciful stories.

How his father, Bobby, and the rest of the extended Hunter family would take to the news of Dean and Sam as a couple was something he and his brother would deal with when the time came. Sam didn’t know that Everyone already knew, except John, who seemed to be figuring it out.

Sam was a romantic. He had fantasized for years that the mystical soul bond, under the right circumstances, could become corporeal. He imagined translucent but indestructible ribbons constructed from the same material that held together the universe—Ether. Dark Matter. Love Manifest.

He was sure the ribbons had materialized in the attic in Spruce Mountain, Vermont. He could see them dance and spin around them as Dean and he had laid under the starlight leaking through the portholes of those impermeable oak walls, warded by hundreds of sigils, each kissed into the wood by hand.

Sam was sure the bond was not a dream. Regardless, he wanted more than a fairy tale. He was ready for real love.

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Third, he knew that Dean loved him and wanted him. And was figuring it out, Dean-style, meaning a painfully convoluted process that involved a mix of Dean’s normal reactions to change—impulsive, metaphorical death leaps over the nearest waterfall à la Sherlock Holmes pulling Moriarty to his doom—versus the green-eyed Hunter’s excruciatingly slow crawl when life involved Feelings and Emotions. Girlie Crap.

Sam knew Dean had been looking at him more in recent months—and not looking away when Sam caught him. Eyes lingering on his mouth and dimples when he laughed, on his thighs when he changed clothes, on his legs and ass when they were sparring.

Staring over his magazine sitting across from his brother at a worn oak library worktable while Sam was immersed in a thick leather-bound book filled with lore, plucked from an obscure archive. (The subject matter expert in attendance was thrilled someone cared)

Staring over his overflowing plates of chips and salsa and cheddar popcorn while Sam discussed philosophy and math with a circle of admirers in a student union. And while barreling down interstates at sub-supersonic speeds, magically warded against LEOs and conventional radar, Dean’s lingering glances on straightaways through the Heartland and the high deserts of the West.

Excuses to touch. A return to the affectionate bumps and nudges of their younger days when Dean
would cuddle his Sammy in the back seat of the Impala or in a shared twin bed, petting his shaggy hair and blowing wet kisses on the back of his neck.

The recent turning point had been the night in the attic. The uncommon peace that came from feeling safe, rare in a Hunter’s life, created a space for contemplation and for Dean’s feelings to blossom. The way his older brother held him was new. Different.

Sam had known since puberty that what he felt for Dean was more than brotherly love, and cradled in his arms, under the unworldly constellations created by the sigils, he knew for sure it was reciprocated, even though Dean had said nothing and had ventured nothing inappropriate.

Words and action weren’t needed. Yet.

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24 Hours Earlier

Sam felt lighter than air, stoned on an endorphin high. A band of Hunters and Adepts saved the world, and the future looked bright.

The brothers had patched up John when he came back to the Topeka motel where Sam and Dean had waited out crisis with the corpses of the Hunters killed in the attack on the Black Coven. After copious cups of coffee and some really good cake donuts, the family loaded up the truck and the Impala and drove to the Hunter-friendly farmer’s land, spending most of the day in the solemn work of tending to the remains and preparing for the funerals. Sam participated fully in the holy and ancient rituals: washing the corpses, wrapping them in old, clean sheets provided by the farmer on whose property the services would occur, and building the pyres.

Watching the bodies burn, he felt sad, but strong and alive. Felt like the equal of his brother and father. Proud of being a Hunter. He’d felt saddest while cleaning and wrapping the spooned bodies of the two Engel sisters, with Caroline’s embracing Maggie and Maggie’s arms crossed over those of her sister. This was the Hunters’ custom for spouses, loving partners, parents and children, and sometimes siblings, like Caroline and Magpie, who died together. There had been vague rumors that their relationship had been closer than most sisters, but Hunters are a tolerant bunch, and, as Rufus liked to say, real love is hard to find.

Their bodies were broken, but they were lovely. Despite all they had seen of the world, the young women looked innocent, their faces serene in death.

He wondered what Dean and he would look like when their times came. Would they go together? Would they be wrapped in one shroud, embracing? He hoped they would die heroes.

Throwing caution to the wind, for the rest of the day and into the evening and morning hours at the bar, Sam touched his brother without hesitation.

Like when they were kids.

Like when John would park the Impala in an inconspicuous corner of a busy shopping center parking lot, lock them in, and ward the windows against harm. He would leave his little boys to nap and play, admonishing Dean to take care of Sammy. They would wrestle in the back seat like puppies, too small to do each other much harm, and eventually fall asleep. Dean always managed to position himself as to shield his brother from the world.

Like when they would sit on the edge of a bed, arms around each other, listening to their father’s
stories on those infrequent occasions when he chose the company of his adoring sons over a chance acquaintance at a roadside bar.

Like when they would walk together to the latest school, hand in hand. When Dean decided he was too big to hold the hand of his little brother, he would walk just close enough to Sammy to touch, with splayed fingers, the small of his back. To guide and protect him.

They always seemed to be touching in those days.

Sam recalled two old ladies eating ice cream and pie at a no-name diner in the middle of Illinois. (Years later, telling this story to Dean, they both laughed when Sam realized those “old ladies” were probably in the mid-forties.) The women, a blonde and a red head, were talking about their respective spouses.

Even pre-teen Sammy could tell they genuinely liked their husbands. Small details, like how Blondie’s man would make her favorite buckwheat pancakes for supper when she had to work late at the hospital. And Red’s husband was a sucker for stray animals, rescuing orphaned kittens and housing them at his accounting firm, where hapless clients would fall in love and take a purring friend home with their finished tax returns.

And then Blondie started talking about something called the Magnet, and Red squealed a little, the ice cream melting from her spoon forgotten as she paused in mid-air and mid-lick.

“You know?” asked Blondie, appreciatively.

Sounding like she was reciting from memory, Red cheerfully sermonized, preaching to a one-woman church choir.

“No matter where you are, no matter what you are doing, if you’re sitting near the one you love, the two of you will be like magnets. Wherever you start, in a few minutes you will be shifting closer, leaning in, scooting a chair over so that your feet or hips are touching. Your hand will stray to his arm, or his hand on the table, or –and she paused for effect–his thigh under the table.” And the two women giggled like proverbial schoolgirls.

Sam realized that more and more he was checking and doubling checking where Dean was in a room, turning his chair, shifting towards Dean, like a sliver of lodestone magnetized by a lightning bolt and always pointing North.

Always pointing home.

Chapter End Notes

Holmes disappearance at the Reichenbach Falls was Arthur Conan Doyle’s failed attempt to kill off the detective and free himself of the burden of having created an all-consuming popular character. It does bear some similarity to Sam/Lucifer’s falling in the pit with Adam/Michael. Chuck is known to be a great admirer of the prolific British author.
Truth and Consequences

Chapter Summary

Sam is too late.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Leaving Topeka - Showtime

By Sam’s calculations, he had been in the shower only a few minutes, but it was too long for an impatient big brother.

“Get your ass out here,” he heard Dean yell.

He grinned. Turned off the water and stepped out of the stall and into the tiny bathroom. Grabbed a scratchy towel and dried off. It rasped pleasantly against his skin. Combed back his wet hair. He could tend to it in the car; the Impala’s powerful heating and cooling system made a great hair dryer, much to Dean’s disgust. Slithered into a worn-soft pair of black briefs and his clean, second-best jeans that were just a tad too tight and slung too low on his hips for fieldwork. Those new growth spurts would require a trip to Goodwill when they reached Chicago.

He wiped dry the containers of shower gel and shampoo and slipped them into a gallon plastic zip bag—a travel tip he learned years ago at that yuppie restaurant from the same men who discussed how to age documents in a microwave or with a quick dip in weak tea.

Sam opened the bathroom door and walked into the bedroom bare-footed and bare-chested, having left his plaid shirt and green canvas jacket on his bed…on purpose. Knew he was making a bit of a thing how he walked into the room.

He had put his open duffel and clean clothes on his bed nearest the bathroom door. (As was his custom, Dean slept in the bed nearest the outer door.) Tossed the plastic bag onto the top layer of the bag.

Sam took regular exercise seriously. He had been a scrawny kid, unlike his brother and father, and although sparring sessions built muscle memory and core strength, he did not have the same muscular physique that developed naturally for Dean and John, nor the benefit of his father’s time in the military. So he ran for endurance, lifted weights for strength, and, for flexibility, created a makeshift workout that mimicked stretching routines he stole from yoga and Pilates classes, the ones he spied on when he pumped iron for cheap at local YMCA gyms on the road.

He liked the body he saw in the mirror, toned and fit with broad shoulders, strong thighs, and a narrowed waist with decent abs. If, according to his father, he took after the Campbell side of the family, he might keep growing. Nice.

Sam stretched out his arms above his head and twisted, muscles warm and loose from the shower. Made himself taller. Bigger. Pulled his torso taut, then released with a measured breath. John raised an eyebrow and tilted his head, puzzling out why Sammy seemed different.
Dean looked up, looked away. And blushed.

Sam smiled, satisfied that his little performance had worked. On the trip to Denver the brothers would talk about college and cases, but when they were alone in their motel room, Sam would be ready for The Talk. About them. Might have to hog tie and gag his big brother to get him to listen, but Sam was sure Dean would need little convincing. Just thinking about what that convincing would entail distracted Sam for a few beats.

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John was seated on one twin bed with the hemp bag and the curse box next to him. Both were open. The amethyst pendant was out of its silk bag and nestled in his white-gloved hand, the jewel much paler than Sam remembered. Dean was perched on a small chair at the end of the other bed, facing his father and pulling on a fresh pair of cotton gloves.

A stick of incense sent a thin spiral of smoke into the air. Smelled like cookies: cinnamon and nutmeg. John remembered to tell Dean to disarm the room’s smoke detector. Setting off motel fire alarms happens more frequently than Chuck has documented in his books about the brothers and the Hunter’s Life.

They had not taken down the portable iron and silver sigils, several of which still were hooked over curtain rods and the back of the door leading outside.

Sam shrugged into his shirt, buttoned it up, and cleared his throat. He didn’t want to interrupt Dean’s time with the pendant before John called up the Adept to come get it. Heck, he wanted to hold it one more time as well. But he also wanted to make his speech before they left the room, so he and Dean could scheme on the trip to Denver.

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Let’s press the time/space pause button for what authors such as Chuck refer to as “exposition” or “background”. Five minutes, tops.

Here’s the thing. Experienced Adepts, including Hunters and Witches, have journals like John’s, but some are more like cookbooks, filled with magical recipes, handwritten or typed out and pasted into place.

Practitioners of the White Arts will chronicle advice about Holy Water and Holy Oil and the powers inherent in sacred plants. Tried and true recipes for warding—what everyone who travels in the Supernatural worlds should know to stay safe. Drawings of proven sigils. What a Hunter learns the first two years on the job or dies trying.

There are the basics regarding what most call the **Three Sisters**: Salt, Silver, and Iron. When Bobby and Jody will figure out how boron, in the form of boric acid, affects the otherwise indestructible Leviathans, some will call the metalloid the **Fourth Sister**. Becomes an entertaining point of debate for decades. Pure boron, it seems, comes only from outer space. Curious. But we digress. Again.

Many American Hunters concentrate on North American Lore. But the diversity of supernatural phenomena imported from other countries, plus the need to know a half dozen holy and ancient languages, means that even the simplest recipes include Latin, Greek, Aramaic, Arabic, and Hebrew blessings. And Hunter education starts with the one word everyone learns first, the equivalent of a kid’s nursery rhyme: **Christo**!

A copy of a Hunter’s basic inventory of techniques and compounds is sort of like those mandatory
cookbooks given to traditional brides by older female relatives before the Internet and YouTube: the old Betty Crocker series, or The Joy of Cooking, or Julia Child’s Mastering the Art of French Cooking, where you could find the simplest blueprints for French toast and French fries and the secrets for creating complicated soufflés, broken down step-by-step.

Then there are the customized formulas. Some paranoid folk, like Frank Devereaux and Rufus Turner, hoard their information; others, like Pastor Jim and Bobby, believe they have a duty to teach tyros and share with the larger Hunter community.

And everyone has their favorites.

Remember the scene Chuck documented in the barn in Pontiac, Illinois, where Dean and Bobby first met Castiel?

“Traps and talismans from every faith on the globe,” said Bobby, when Dean commented on his “art project”.

Even before that seminal encounter, Bobby had a fondness for mashing up ingredients and enchantments across continents and mythologies. Felt that a simple combination of artifacts, spells, and potions from different cultures offered better protection that the most complicated of spells from one mythological pantry.

His special fallback? A combination of Hindu gold and Hebraic and Aramaic prayer, with a sprinkle of incense, thick with cinnamon and nutmeg.

Bobby’s protection spell for the pendant. And other artifacts. Like the gold lock he gave to a favorite boychik years ago.

Sam is going to remember in about 30 seconds.

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“She’s gonna be weak, boys,” said John. “But there should be enough juice to light up the sigils. Should be pretty. Gonna unlock her.”

And then he began to pray in Hebrew. And Sam froze at the familiar words, ones that every observant Jew and Christian knows by heart. Maybe the first prayer most Jews learn. Simple, like Christo. He now remembered how Bobby had described the locking spell he gave to his younger self and how he bragged to the boy why this was his special way of protecting the most precious of treasures.

Sam knew this blessing well. Knew the English translation. He had pronounced it hundreds of times, unlocking and locking his own treasure: the silk envelope in the hidden compartment in his duffel bag, which protected the acceptance letter from Stanford, almost a decade’s worth of papers, and a wrapped-up rectangular object tied in gold silk parchment and green string, the size and shape of a small book or stack of pamphlets.

“Sh’ma Yisra’eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.”

“Hear, O Israel. The Lord is Our God. The Lord is One.”

And then John began the second part, another one of Bobby’s mixes, a bit of Aramaic from the Mourner’s Kaddish, thanking God. (Bobby had thought King Solomon would have approved.) Two snippets of holy prayer, from two different sources, in two different ancient tongues, and unlikely to be said together, back-to-back. And if they were recited that way, no harm to the
speaker. And no effect without the incense and the enchanted artifact in view.

*Yit'barakh v'yish'tabach v'yit'pa'ar v'yit'romam v'yit'nasei*

“Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled.”

Sam could not speak. His training, what had been drummed into him, Dean, and every Adept, Hunter, and Talismen, was that a spell, even a curse, should never be interrupted except under dire circumstances, because the outcome of an unfinished enchantment could be worse than the curse.

Unintended consequences can undermine the best intentions.

He closed his eyes and held his breath. Gripped the air with his fists at his side.

Several things happened at once.

The pale pink amethyst began to glow, as did the sigils.

“Awesome,” said Dean, grinning.

He glanced up to where Sam still stood, hands clenched, eyes closed. He rose to his feet.

“Sammy?” he asked. When his brother didn’t move, he called his name again, and began to walk towards him.

John looked up, but then the jewel became engulfed by a ball of light, as had happened in the truck in response to the Black Coven’s magic. It shot rays aimed at Sam’s duffel bag, which responded in kind.

Dean leapt at Sam and tackled him to the ground while John dropped the pendant on the twin bed where he was sitting and fearlessly lunged for the duffel bag on the other bed. He began to dig in and dump the contents of the bag on the bedspread, hunting for what he suspected was a hex bag, perhaps planted by a vengeful sycophant wanting to win points with surviving members of the dark magic cohort.

Sam, meanwhile, had come back to life and was yelling and trying to escape from the grip of his protective brother, but Dean was determined, as usual, to shield Sammy at all costs. It turned into a no-holds-barred fight, both brothers punching and kicking, with Sam’s increased desperation proving too much for Dean, who could not fight back hard enough to really hurt his Sammy.

And Sam was now as tall as Dean. Although Dean had more upper body strength, Sam had those long legs. He flipped Dean and flung himself out of his brother’s arms, still next to the bed. Dean caught his breath and pushed himself off the floor.

Both brothers stared at their father, who was holding the silk envelope, which he had ripped from the no-longer secret pocket in the bottom of the duffel bag, revealed by the glowing light triggered by the pendant in sync with the enchanted lock. The glamour had dissipated; the gold lock had popped open. The light from the pendant faded and vanished.

A pile of papers and the parchment-wrapped package fell onto the bed. Dean stepped closer, but John waved him off.

Sam had lost the ability to form words. He felt frozen in time, pinned to the moment like a butterfly captured on a piece of cardboard by a 19th century amateur entomologist. Beautiful and dead, preserved forever.
Expressionless, John began to shift through the papers. The test scores, the copies of the letters of recommendation. A letter of encouragement from Cecilia, written in the flowery cursive she had learned in Kentucky in another lifetime. Typed forms and letters, signed Robert Singer in Bobby’s distinctive hand, giving permission for someone named Samuel Singer to go on field trips, attend advanced placement classes, take tests…and apply to Stanford University.

John unwrapped the rectangular object. Unknotted the green silk twine and removed the honey-colored silk parchment covering. Turned out to be a stack of hundred dollar bills. Emerald was the color for prosperity. Young Sammy had chosen it for luck. Every time Sam had accumulated enough cash, by hustling dart games and working day jobs in rural areas where no one paid much attention to age or social security numbers, he would take his messy handful of bills and change to a local bank. Ask for a clean, new century bill to add to his pile. The money for expenses for his first year in Palo Alto. The money he never touched, even when he was hungry and alone while John and Dean went on a hunt.

John found the emancipation court order with the notarized stamp, which said, in effect, that Sam was no longer his son. John read the words through three times, his lips silently moving as he studied the legalese. He raised his head and stared, blank-faced, at Sam, then turned his attention back to the remaining papers. He said nothing. Neither did Dean or Sam.

Next was the big white paper envelope with the red logo, filled with information about housing and classes and meal vouchers and campus clubs. Took out every piece of paper separately, read every word on every page, then returned them to the paper envelope. Folded everything neatly. Handled each item with care.

And then, finally, the business-sized envelope, addressed to Samuel Singer at Bobby’s house in South Dakota. It had been on the top of the pile. John saved it for last.

John read the letter, the one Sam knew by heart, folded and refolded until the creases had frayed and torn apart, so Sam had to tape the pieces together. The letter typed on fancy university stationery that said Samuel Singer had been awarded a full four-year scholarship to Stanford University, based on merit and need, with housing, meals, class fees, laboratory fees, medical insurance, and a book allowance covered. What the kids called the full ride. Pre-law.

Words of praise laced the acceptance letter.

The sentence “Exceptional achievement considering the unfortunate circumstances of Mr. Singer’s family life” pierced John’s heart like a silver stiletto. The kind of wound that kills, even as the heart keeps beating.

John carefully shuffled and jogged the pages neatly back into their original order, lining up the edges. He laid the pile of papers on the bed next to the open silk envelope, Sam’ duffel bag, and the remaining items he had removed in his search for the origins of the mirrored light from the amethyst, and stepped back.

Dean snatched the papers up, emptied the big envelope, and read through each document, but unlike his father, he scanned them quickly and dropped each sheet of paper carelessly back on the bed, like he was discarding trash. He paused at the emancipation letter, frowned, read it, read it again, and his eyes filled with tears.

The tears flowed when he read the acceptance letter, pausing at the same sentence that had wounded his father. It fell from his hands as if it were on fire.

John had sat back down on the twin bed by the door, collapsing like a puppet with the strings cut,
looking at the carpet.

Sam had not moved, but he was thinking. Okay, okay, he still had time to fix this. Always the romantic.

The door of the motel room flung open—the door that had been locked and warded hours before—and in strolled the Adept, in the form of a short, bone-thin working cowboy. Name of Wilson Axtell Lamar, nicknamed Ax. Dusty, boot-cut Wranglers, old denim shirt, and a sun-bleached pale felt Stetson, tilted low across his face, shading his eyes. Hair a little long behind the ears. Once blond, now mostly silver. Face and hands burned to saddle brown from decades outside on a working ranch: his family's home in Oklahoma.

Cherokee and Chickasaw and Apache blood that he knew of. Suspected some Comanche that his family wouldn’t talk about. Looked at the world with golden-brown eyes like those of a coyote shifter. (There was idle talk over shots of roadhouse whiskey, but no one knew for sure.)

A Civil War-era great-great-grandfather from Georgia whose ancestors fought on both sides in the American Revolution and a great-grandmother whose family’s original land grant from Spain, in what was now New Mexico, was signed centuries before by a king.

Good with animals and protection spells against disease. Spent time on the front lines in a couple of wars as an infantryman. Crack shot with any firearm. Calm and fearless in any fight. Had been backup in the recent action against the Black Coven and Colossus, in case the worst of the storms had moved south of the Kansas-Oklahoma border.

His wife was a flaxen-haired scholar of arcane languages from Germany. Came over on a field trip to the American West with a group of graduate students 40 years ago. (The Germans have a special affection for the Wild West.) She never left. Taught at a local university 50 miles from the ranch. Loved cooking for the ranch hands, big meals featuring chicken-fried steak and homemade sausages, which German immigrants had introduced to a grateful West decades before. Always was another place at the table for a homeless veteran traveling through. Love horses and children and her taciturn husband.

Even Frank, the crazy techno hermit, trusted Dr. Heidi Lamar.

Ax wore a silver medallion with wards from the time of King Solomon and before, a 25th anniversary gift from his doting better half.

And was aiming a Remington 870 shotgun into the room, at the ready.

“You boys okay?” the cowboy asked. He looked at John, who had not bothered to look up. At Dean, still standing, who had not wiped the tears from his cheeks. At Sam, in shock. Both boys had bruises starting to blossom on their faces. Looked like Dean was going to have a beauty of a black eye.

Glanced at the papers strewn on the bed next to Sam’s duffel bag. Although he never had occasion to help, Ax knew about Sam’s Grand Plan, and his wife had shared some tips about academic politics with the younger Winchester during a late-night phone call a couple of years back.

He saw the pendant, still on the bed where John dropped it. The jewel was now clear, looking like nothing more than a piece of cheap glass, its magic exhausted. He picked it up by its chain, dropped it into the silk bag, placed it in the curse box, and gently closed the lid. He laid a hand on John’s shoulder.
“Come on, friend. Let’s take care of her, and I’ll be on my way. Will give your regards to the good Pastor.”

He nodded at the brothers, who acted as if they could not see or hear him.

John bent forward and rose from the bed. He looked 20 years older than he did 30 minutes before. Limped to the open door, following Ax outside to the truck, where they would finish the brief binding spell in tandem.

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Dean walked over to the rickety motel chair and sat down. Sam, as if released from a paralyzing curse, trotted into the bathroom and returned with a clean towel, which Dean took without looking up and wiped his face. Winced when he accidentally rubbed the bruises from the fight with his brother too hard. Blew his nose on a corner and dropped it to the floor.

Sam began to gather up the papers and put them back into the silk envelope and snapped the still functional gold clasp closed. No magic. Put on his canvas jacket.

Out of habit, centered the silk envelope in the bottom of the duffel and replaced all of the items John had pulled out in his frantic search for the hex bag he thought the pendant had revealed and hopefully disabled. To save his sons from its curse without a thought for his own safety.

Sam zipped up the top, sat on edge of the bed, facing away from Dean, and waited.

Ax and his father were taking their time with the protection spell, sitting in the cab of the Adept’s elderly pale green Dodge pick-up.

And then, it started. John was yelling, a one-side diatribe. Loud and angry enough that someone was going to call the cops pretty quick. Dean stood up and strode outside. Sounds of car doors slamming and Ax's truck leaving, skidding a little on the rough gravel in the parking lot.

John still was yelling as he and Dean returned to the motel room. Dean closed the door behind them, and muttered the warding spell back in place, the one that Ax had turned off when he entered the room. Dean included the word *umbra*—shadow and darkness—a reliable way to soundproof the room as well as mask the odor of potions and incense and cloak the windows and doors.

And John kept yelling.

It was like the worst beating Sam had ever endured. Worse than being mauled by that Black Dog in rural Montana or being thrown around that Wisconsin cemetery by the ghost of the abused wife of a famous politician.

Worse than that sparring session in rural Arkansas. What John called “a lesson”. His father sent Dean away on a fake errand three towns over and told fourteen-year-old Sam that it was time to stop pretending, and Sam better fight back for real, because John was not going to stop until either one of them were unconscious, or Sam said his safe word: *Wilder.*

Sam was terrified, but would not back down.

John never thought that his younger son would not safe word out—more proof that John knew little about the boy. When Dean returned, John was standing over Sam’s silent body, and 18-year-old Dean flew out of the Impala and landed a punch on John’s jaw that threw him on his ass. He scooped his brother up in his arms, tenderly placed him on the Impala’s back seat and drove to the home of a Hunter-friendly, retired Army medic, 50 miles away, in 20 minutes.
The medic, used to battlefield carnage, cut away Sam’s clothing and stuck a needle in the boy’s arm, draining a bag of lactated ringers to offset the blood loss. Dean called Bobby, then had to warn his surrogate father that his curses were turning Dean’s cell phone an ugly shade of red, like that of dried blood. The older Hunter hung up, got on the wire, and started calling up favors across three states.

Within a few minutes the psychic Missouri was on the phone with the medic, with advice and prayers.

Within the hour, three Adept healers were at the door, one of nonhuman origin with long black hair, vertical pupils in green eyes, and elongated fangs. And she purred.

The medic, a new recruit to the Talismen world, stepped back and watched wide-eyed as the trio knit bones, repaired tissue, and revived the boy’s fading will to live.

He also watched the soul bond manifest as a lifeline between the two brothers. Dean’s life force diminished as Sam’s damaged animus took what it could. Dean held steady until he fainted. But, the healers insisted he would be fine.

The next day both brothers, the medic, and the healers shared a massive breakfast of fruit crepes and wild boar sausages. And very good beer. The medic and the Egyptian descendent of Bastet seemed to be forging a special bond, so the other two healers, nurses from a hospital in Little Rock, headed out with a kiss each for both boys, the medic, and the beautiful shifter, and Dean loaded his little brother into the Impala. The boys headed up to South Dakota. Stayed with Bobby a month, refusing phone calls from John until he showed up, penitent, but still arguing it was “for the boy’s own good”.

Sam forgave him before Dean and Bobby did.

And yes, John’ words that day in the Topeka motel hurt worse than that beating.

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John looped back repeatedly to the double helixes of trust and betrayal, lies and what should be the unbreakable bonds of family loyalty and devotion to a cause. He brought in Mary’s murder and the hundreds of lives they had saved, would save. Of the evil things that stalked the earth and how few people were prepared to protect the innocent. Over and over and over. He spit the words at Sam like he was ridding his body of poison. He called Sam Despicable. Traitor. Selfish. And worse.

Sam repeatedly tried to explain that he had changed his mind, that the overwhelming experience of watching the Black Coven’s plot beaten back by a small troop of brave humans and allied beings showed Sam where his heart was. That he had always been loyal to his father and brother and the Hunt, that his Stanford Plan was about making enough money to support them so they could live decent lives while they hunted.

He did it all from love, which was the same reason why he had abandoned the Plan. And if the pendant had not revealed the hidden documents, they would be celebrating his choices. If he had time to tell them before the amethyst broke the binding spell.

John would not listen.

Dean watched and said nothing.

Finally, John stopped. He looked at Sam, who was white as one of the ghosts they hunted and was at this point an emotional mess, made up of equal parts of defiance and misery. Dean thought if he
had stripped the clothes off his brother that his body would be covered with open wounds from his father’s words.

“If you are packed, Dean will take you to the bus station. You can go to California. To hell with you. And don’t come back.”

And with that John left the room, not bothering to close the door, walked to his truck, got in, and drove away, west to Denver.

Chapter End Notes

I promised a happy ending, and I always keep my fan fiction promises. Eventually. Meanwhile, a bittersweet scene coming up, and Dean is wonderful.

On the issue of unintended consequences: Every time someone interrupts spellwork on the show, I hold my breath. Who knows what even a partial curse or prayer will loose in the world. Like not finishing an experiment in a chemistry lab. Some catalytic actions can't be paused or discarded.

And, I happen to be Jewish, albeit a secular Jew, and am using prayers I had known as a child. Decades before the show, I suffered from supernatural nightmares almost every night, with demons and witches and Nazis. I learned about lucid dreaming and would use the same "Sh'ma" in Hebrew and English to ward off my attackers. Worked very well most of the time. Maybe you learned different versions.
The Winchesters deal with heartbreak, each in his own way, and Sam heads for California.

A short nasty scene in the beginning with some foul-mouthed bullies, but only lasts a couple of paragraphs.

Topeka – 2001

John - After the Storm – 18 hours before the Great Reveal

John Winchester stood in the crowded men’s room of that Topeka bar and BBQ grill, staring at himself in the mirror over the gray granite sink. He had washed his face with handfuls of cold water, cleaning off a red sauce moustache—evidence of an impromptu, rib-eating contest with Dean. He had pretended to grump about his older son’s lack of table manners even while Sam, all long arms and legs, held his brother down as John took the opportunity to smear sauce on his freckled son’s nose. Around them, the survivors of the cursed storm celebrated with pitchers of beer, platters of smoked meats, and laughter.

John remembered a time when he threw a squealing green-eyed toddler up in the air, caught him with ease, and carried him into the backyard to cuddle with Mary and the baby. And John and Mary had talked about the future while little Dean doted on his Sammy. Both parents had grown up a little lonely as children–no siblings to play with and John without a father since the age of four. They wanted a big family and thought they could make it happen. He already co-owned the garage with Mike Guenther, and both men had a shared vision of expanding the existing shop and maybe even opening a second location, staffed with veterans like John.

Mary wanted to go back to work eventually, at least part time. Maybe work at the garage, she said. John told her he would build onto the office with room for their kids to plug away at homework after school and maybe help out. Whatever their children decided to do for a living, they all would know a trade. Auto mechanics can earn three squares and car payments anywhere, anytime…

The big guy with the surfer bleach job standing next to him in the crowded men’s room cawed with laughter, disrupting John’s sweet memories. The dude would have been good looking one hundred pounds ago. Now his arms and belly strained against a 1983 Beach Boys tour t-shirt.

“Didja see them?” Bleach said to his three minions, skinny, meth-mouthed truckers with skin yellowed from failing livers.

“Those boys, the hot fag bitches, the one with the lips and the green eyes, and his boy, the tall kid
with the pretty hair, throwing hat tricks at the dartboard. Both of them, man, both of them. Boys or girls, doesn’t matter to me. Wanna take them on. Hold them down. Have them.”

His minions snickered; most of the other men in the crowded bathroom either ignored him or purposely moved away. The mood of the crowd was happy, and no one wanted to be infected by the sadistic thug’s bad vibes. Several men, unrelated except for the fact they shared good hearts and muscles earned on farmlands and football fields, were making up their minds to shut the guy up and throw him and his buddies out with the trash. Exchanging a few glances and shared a nod.

Bleach prattled on, talking about young asses and making them bleed. Making those pretty boys scream. Spoke in vivid, repetitive detail.

A tilt of the head and a grin. Little Sammy once had said that sometimes his father smiled like the crocodile in Peter Pan. Lots of teeth. John looked at Bleach’s reflection in the mirror and then swiveled to face him. John’s smile turned sweet and seductive. The smile that, according to Hunter Lore, could cause a ghost to smoke out—spontaneous combustion—or, witnesses swore, a vampire to faint from pure, unfiltered terror. John’s smile, the scariest thing in this and seventy-seven worlds, and counting.


“My good boys. My sons.”

Kansas surfer dude, finally finally shut up.

But, it was too late. And then John described, in vivid detail, never repeating himself, what he would do to the big blond and his buddies. And how. And when. If they so much as took a breath in the same room as his good boys. Or John found out that they touched another living soul the way Bleach had described.

The men who had edged forward to remove Bleach and his pack paused at the beginning of John’s soft-spoken speech. He used the same tone as if he had been describing a problem with a set of spark plugs to a customer at the garage. Easy to fix. No big deal.

The crowd made a hole, and Bleach and his crew stumbled out. Looked like they snagged a collective case of food poisoning, their yellowish skin turning paler. And green. A few of the men who had been watching and listening caught John’s eye, nodded in appreciation. He nodded back. A couple raised a hand in acknowledgement, the taciturn wave you trace in the air on a narrow country road, passing another vehicle, saying a quick howdy.

And one perceptive old coot with tattoos and a “Semper Fi” ball cap snapped John a salute, which he responded to with a genuine smile.

John loved his boys.

Since before he left the motel for the rendezvous with the other Hunters to confront the Black Coven, he knew that something had changed for Sammy. He seemed more settled, more connected. Like he had grown-up, overnight.

And Dean? Well, Dean was looking at his younger brother in a way that puzzled John. Have to have a talk with Pastor Jim. And Missouri, his first Supernatural mentor. About that Soul connection. Everyone he knew in the Hunter community either made a big fuss, citing obscure Lore about how the love between bonded mates was what held the universe together, or they
refused to say a word, not even looking John in the eye when the topic came up. So, where did this leave his boys?

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As happy as he felt a few hours ago, that was how grief-stricken John was as he drove away. Sam had lied for years and was ready to commit the gravest betrayal: leaving the family. If he now was telling the truth, had changed his mind, and was planning to stay, it was not enough. It was not redemption. It did not make up for what he did and what he planned to do.

But what hurt the most was the wording on the emancipation documents and the boxes that Sammy checked off:

Your parents are abusive, neglectful, or otherwise harmful to you.

You have moral objections to your parents’ living situation.

Allegedly, John had been served with papers regarding the legal petition, but he figured that Sammy had found someone to pretend to be him. And remembering the South Dakota address on the paperwork, he guessed knew his stand-in well.

He stopped only once on the interstate into Denver. Filled the truck’s gas tank, pit stopped, washed the road dirt from his face, and grabbed another case of cheap beer. Drove the 540 miles in five hours, spellcraft protecting him and the truck from law enforcement’s prying radar eyes. Got to his motel on the outskirts of Jefferson County fifteen miles later, nestled in the foothills. Bought a bottle each of rotgut tequila and a cheap Jack knock-off, lay propped up against the headboard on a sagging mattress, and alternated shots until he fell into a dreamless void.

Sam and Dean

John was gone, but his brutal words still echoed in the empty room.

Both brothers were sitting. Silence.

Dean stood up.

“Put on your socks and shoes, Sammy,” he said. “I’ll drive you to the bus station.”

He spoke as if it were an unremarkable day from their childhood: a serious, eleven-year-old Dean getting his easily distracted seven-year-old brother ready for school.

Sam responded without thinking. Found his shoes underneath his bed where he had kicked them during his battle with Dean. Fresh socks tucked inside. His hands shook as he tied his shoelaces, adrenaline still coursing through his blood.

He stood up and checked the room for forgotten flotsam and jetsam from their stay. Uneaten pastries and junk food, cheap cardboard coffee cups, gum wrappers, paper bags, a local newspaper, empty beer bottles, and a half-used roll of paper towels. He filled a clean grocery bag with unopened candy bars and leftover donuts wrapped in sheets of paper towels; threw the rest away in the trash.

Dean removed the remaining silver and iron sigils from the room, and while his brother watched, unzipped Sam’s duffel bag, placed them on top, and zipped it back up. He shouldered the bag, an unasked-for favor, then turned and walked to the motel room’s door. Unlocked it, muttered the spell to dissolve the warding, and held it open. Sam left the motel room with the food bag, head up,
and Dean locked the door behind them.

The Impala was sealed tight, in response to what the Winchesters had experienced the last few days. Dean opened Baby’s trunk with a bronze key dipped in holy water and a simple Latin exorcism, adapted to lift the car’s protection spell. He threw Sam’s duffel inside with a minor display of muscle, his first sign of emotion since John had left—and since his tears had dried up.

Sam, standing next to the passenger door, flinched as the heavy trunk lid dropped.

“Get in,” said Dean. “I’ll settle up the bill. Keep the food for your trip.”

Sam waited until Dean had entered the motel’s office, then leaned over, kissed the edge of the Impala’s roof, and whispered, “Sorry, Baby”. Patted the shiny, black skin of the old car as if saying good-bye to the family dog, opened the door, and slid in, bumping his head. More proof that he had been poked by a recent growth spurt.

He grimaced, shut the Impala’s door, and waited for Dean.

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They drove through streets littered with tree branches, broken window glass, and debris torn from buildings.

Sam was working on a new speech to convince his brother that he had planned to stay, that their father was wrong, and that they could fix this. But it was Dean who broke the silence.

“Was it all part of your game?” he said.

“What game?” said Sam.

Dean waved a dismissive hand as he drove.

“This,” he said. “Your con game. The Master Plan so you could leave Dad and me.”

A pause.

“Did you pretend to like me? Is that the reason you seemed happier the past few days, because you knew you were leaving us?”

“Pretending? Oh, God, no Dean, never, never.”

The vulnerability in Dean’s voice stabbed Sam, a wound that would not heal for months.

What was unspoken was that Dean finally had let himself believe that the attraction he felt for Sam was reciprocated, that he, the older brother, was not a cursed object, vile and tormented by the worst kind of lust, for wanting his beautiful baby brother. Wanting him in his arms again and again.

Lust was only the biochemical part of the soul bond. If someone had told Dean that he could never have sex with another human being again, but he could have Sammy in his arms at night, to pet his hair and press kisses on his forehead and to hold his hand in Baby’s front seat, he would have said yes in a heartbeat.

Now, Dean’s sense of loss was unbearable. So, he lashed out.

“I trusted you. Dad and me, we trusted you.” (Loved you was unspoken.)
Something shifted. Sam wasn’t feeling quite so guilty anymore. Yeah, he screwed up, but trust goes both ways. Why wouldn’t his brother and father let him talk, listen to him? Why didn’t they trust him to have a very good reason to keep his big secret all these years? And, to trust him when he said he had changed his mind because of the enormity of the encounter with the Black Coven and the epic battle with Colossus. The event had shown him the nobility of the Hunter life in a way he had never understood before.

If they trusted him, they would have been eager to learn of his change of heart. If they wanted him to stay.

Sam’s sense of loss was unbearable. So, he pouted.

The bus depot, housed in a modest gas station and convenience store near the on-ramp to Interstate 70, turned out to be a small waiting room with a counter, chairs, and a ticket machine inside and a worn wooden bench outside near the end of the store. No one was around except a sleepy clerk sitting next to the cash register, visible through the big glass windows in the front of the building, watching an old war movie on a portable television.

Dean pulled up and parked at the door nearest the bench.

Moving quickly, he opened the trunk, and pulled out the duffel. Sam dawdled, making a big deal of gathering up his bag of snacks and neatly folding the top into a handle. Finally, got out of the car and moved to grab the bag. A sign on the building announced arrivals and departures; the next bus for the San Francisco was not leaving until 10 pm, and it was barely past noon.

Dean dumped the bag on the ground in front of him.

“I’ll be back,” said Dean. He jumped back into the car and drove off.

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Dean

Sam’s 18th birthday had passed without fanfare a couple of weeks before, forgotten in the turmoil of travel and Spruce Mountain and the convening of the Canadian Loup Garous and the Black Coven and Colossus. Sam had known, weeks before his world ended in the motel room, that somewhere in Dean’s duffel would be a present, and when they could catch their collective breaths, they would celebrate, just the two of them, in a shared motel room. Something to look forward to.

After Mary’s murder, John stopped celebrating birthdays and holidays, so it always was just the brothers.

Dean’s birthday gifts could be embarrassing, like strawberry-flavored lube or one of those behind-the-cigarette-counter porn magazines that offered physical relief, but little to soothe Sam’s singular obsession with green eyes and a warrior’s soul.

A last-minute purchase at a convenience store meant that either Dean was neck deep in a hunt, or broke, or both.

Sometimes the gift was practical, like those really good socks John always was ranting about, or some cool camping gear, or a glass-lined flask for holding holy water.

And, sometimes, the gift, regardless of how modest, showed that Dean was paying attention, like a well-worn volume of Thorton Wilder’s The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Dean’s congratulatory present after Sam’s success with the production of Our Town. Or tickets to a university planetarium, which
turned out to be pretty cool for both boys—leaning back in comfy chairs in the auditorium as they watched the universe roll by on the domed ceiling.

Or a throwing knife, with a blade of Samurai steel and a handle crafted of bamboo, amber, and silver. It was perfectly balanced and flew from Sam’s hand like a falcon in a killing dive.

Crafted by a convergence of magics from a dozen cultures, it was assembled at an outpost where the Silk Road snaked through the Eurasian Steppe thousands of years ago, and, like most of the treasures in the Hunters’ world, had come home to sleep in that triple-locked, triple-blessed English oak cabinet in Pastor Jim’s cozy Minnesota rectory. He had shown it to Dean, who sweated off the price cutting brush and pulling weeds on the neglected church property during an uncommon heat wave. Started before dawn and worked until midnight. Seven long days of the most boring work. Demonic torture, Dean thought at the time. But Pastor Jim knew that the price was best paid in sweat equity and love.

The look on Sam’s face and the hug he got was more than worth the blisters and sore muscles.

Curiously, the knife bonded only to one owner at a time, or so the Lore said. The artifact could read the heart and intent of any entity that pulled it from its fine leather scabbard, human or Supernatural. An innocent would simply nick a finger and replace the knife, a little wiser. True Owners, like Sam, never would receive a scratch.

But thieves and other opportunistic criminals, no matter how nimble-fingered, would manage to cut themselves, deeply and painfully.

Don’t Touch.

If they persisted, the next slip would find an artery. No warning, no pain. Just a brief episode of dizziness, a slow slide to the floor, and a peaceful journey across the Veil to their designated next world.

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Dean was not oblivious to their precarious financial situation. But his strategy was more shortterm than Sam’s. Every year or so, Dean would hanker after something real nice for himself or his extended family and head for a game or three at a special flavor of urban pool hall, tucked away in hardscrabble neighborhoods in big towns like Chicago or Dallas or Boston or Los Angeles.

Dean didn’t need to scam the players that hung out in those shadowy bars into placing big bets. These gamblers were willing to play the pretty kid with the scarred knuckles for real money, and the pot would jack higher when better players were attracted to Dean’s table, as word would spread.

Yes, he was that good: Hunters’ genes and the kind of reflexes and judgment honed in life and death situations. Reading his opponents and anticipating their next moves. Beheading vampires and shooting at ghosts were good practice for playing pool.

The people who ran these pool halls knew about Hunters and the Supernatural world. The windows and doors were hung with sigils that neutralized magic but did not ward against monsters and the like. So witches and demons, shifters and fangs, and some less human-looking creatures might play a game or three against Hunters and Talismen. A tourist would see rough trade and feel a bad vibe, but no fangs or green, Halloween-mask visages. A flash of silver or black eyes would be excused as a trick of the light.
No cheating and no fighting. Fisticuffs too quickly could escalate into butchery and a war of magicked weaponry. To avoid triggering a minor tsunami of destruction neither blessings nor curse words were allowed. Which meant that players spoke a sort of Victorian-era drawing room cowboy dialect, as if Jane Austen was writing the script for a 19th century Vampire comedy of manners, with a little Shakespeare thrown in. In post-Civil War Kansas.

More than once Sam wondered why so many monsters could quote from memory entire scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, even given their Supernatural themes.

Dean had his own rules. Never drink anything on the premises, except from his own flask. Never eat anything, of course. Never touch anything if he could help it, or unlock a box or sniff at an open bottle. Never accept a gift. Pack holy water and salt.

To be on the safe side, he would fill his pretty Colt with all silver rounds instead of his standard one-in-six.

He always brought a small blade, a gift from a grateful young White Witch who had gotten in over her head with some transformation spells. Giant cockroach things, as Dean recalled. (Really? Dean had to ask at the time, even though he secretly thought the case was sort of interesting. And mostly gross.)

The artifact was barely bigger than a kitchen paring knife and looked too pretty to be useful, with its metal handle and blade etched with flowering vines and a mix of decorative inlays. Sort of like a sharp-edge letter opener. But, it held a secret. The inlays and etchings were laid down in silver, gold, bronze (copper and tin), iron, and platinum, which meant it was effective against 95% of the monster community. Good for testing, and, if plunged into its target accurately, could be fatal in an attack.

Dean would win, predictably, fair and square, against the best. No victory dance. No smirking. Would tuck the winnings into his shirt. Never counted the bills and coins, which would be a sign he did not trust his opponents. (He didn't, but diplomacy was more important than losing a few dollars.) Would always park Baby out front and leave after tipping the bartender and wait staff well. They would remember his generosity the next time he stopped in and always made sure he had a good table.

One year he bought Bobby awesome work boots and sent a hefty Christmas donation to Pastor Jim to feed his perpetually voracious cohort of homeless teens; made sure they had new clothes for school. Rufus got some fancy-assed single malt Scotch for Chanukah. And he bought warm sweaters and first aid kits for Hunters operating with threadbare wardrobes and minimal supplies. Kept them in the trunk and would dole them out during joint campaigns, as if he just happened to have extra clothing and equipment to share.

And during the last year on the road with Sam, he had paid attention during those college visits, and while flirting with students and the younger faculty members, had learned what Every Pre-Law College Student Needs. (This was before he was hatching his version of the Big Plan.) An older librarian with short silvery hair and turquoise earrings that almost matched her eyes told him the four books to buy for his gifted brother. Unabridged editions, of course. No paperbacks, of course. *Roget’s Thesaurus*. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. *The Chicago Manual of Style* (Latest edition) And *Strunk’s Elements of Style*. Everything else, she said was gravy.

So he asked about the gravy. A visit to a liberal arts college that was a feeder school to the best law schools on the East Coast led him to the campus bookstore, where he staggered out with two shopping bags filled with the required reading list for their pre-law classes. Hid them in Baby’s
accommodating trunk, spread out one deep and wrapped in waterproof plastic under a clean blanket and some new car repair tools he bought to camo them from Sam’s sharp eyes.

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But it was not enough. While Sam sat on a bench outside the convenience store, clutching his ticket, out of the wind in the cold late spring sun.

Dean shopped. If his deceitful, lying, untrustworthy, betraying, sniveling, cowardly, disinherited younger brother was going to abandon him, and Dad for some hippie-assed school in California, he was going to do it right. Family honor, bitch.

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Sam

Sam looked up when Baby rolled into the parking lot. He could hear the familiar roar over his cheap MP3 player, He wondered if he would get to claim shotgun ever again. Listen to Dean’s favorite 20 songs, over and over, again. Drive at night across high mountain valleys in air so thin and pure that he could see the soft rosy glow of the auras emanating from the Impala’s warding, as if the sleek ebony sedan carried its own dawn, again.

Watching lousy movies on late night free cable in cheap motel rooms, snacking on vines and corn chips. Bumping shoulders and knees while cuddling under a thin motel blanket on a cold night. Borrowing a t-shirt when the supply levels of clean laundry dropped.

Rehashing old arguments just for the sake of wisecracks and verbal sparring. Stupid stuff, like about the best movie candy and the best drummer and could Batman really take on Superman?

Dean pulled up in front of Sam and killed the motor. Got out, but did not look at him as he opened the back door of the car. And started emptying the spacious back seat. And then the passenger side in front.

Sam watched as Dean took out an old Army blanket and spread it on the ground.

Two new pieces of rolling luggage. Large. The kind people take on transatlantic flights when they are moving to a new country. Moved the luggage to the blanket, unzipped both pieces and laid them side-by side. Never said a word.

Then a roll of bubble wrap, the kind you get from packing stores. Strapping tape and scissors.

And several shopping bags filled with…stuff.

Those college books went first. Dean threw Strunk’s, the smallest of the collection at Sam, who caught it without thinking. Meanwhile, he wrapped and loaded books into the bottom of the two pieces of luggage next to the side nearest the wheels, sort of like ballast.

Then came brand-new bed linens. A couple of soft blankets—the Peninsula where Palo Alto was located was notoriously chilly for being in California—two of those firm pillows Sam preferred, and a gigantic bath towel, in Sam’s favorite green. And then clothing: from underwear to dress shirts, new jeans to dress pants, sweatpants, a swimsuit, and exercise clothing. Everything simple. And nice. Classy. Wrapped in tissue paper.

Layered in the bubble wrap.
Then Dean places a briefcase in full-grain leather on top of the clothing in one of the giant roller bags. (Later Sam will learn that it’s Italian, in a color called *cognac*, ridiculously expensive, and will be lusted after by at least half of his pre-law professors, causing him to protect it from wandering hands as if it were a precious younger sister.)

Sam assumed that his brother had ‘chanted’ the twin pieces of luggage to hold extra gear, but the truth is that his brother was supernaturally good at packing.

He zipped up the bags and huffed them upright.

“Will cost you extra to stow them on the bus,” said Dean, the first words he spoke since he arrived. Sam watched, a warm spot growing in his chest. He felt as if he was under a spell, unable to speak or move, still sitting on the old bench.

Dean pulled a fat roll of twenties from the pocket of his jacket and held them out to his stupid, horrible baby brother.

“Here,” he said, not insulting Sam by telling him to put it away someplace safe.

Sam stuffed the small book in his jacket pocket and took the roll from Dean’s extended hand. That’s when he saw that Dean’s wrist was bare.

“Dean,” said Sam. “Where’s your watch?”

Dean yanked his hand away.

Sam got up and walked over to the trunk of the Impala, snapped it open with a potent unlocking spell in Greek that rattled the windows of the convenience store, and looked inside.

Once upon a time, at a precocious seven or eight, he read Rudyard Kipling’s novel *Kim*. His favorite scene was where the young hero was taught to memorize trays of objects at a glance. He and Dean turned it into a game.

Sam, without trying, knew by heart the contents of Baby’s trunk. And knew, at a glance, what was missing. The extra shotgun. The back-up ammo box. Two handguns that they would bring if they suspected that a fire fight was waiting for them. Dean’s favorite machete. Dean’s second-favorite machete. A box of throwing knives. New climbing gear. Stuff that was valuable but not absolutely necessary on the job.

Sam turned to Dean, who had been standing silently next to the car.

“Dean, show me your lighter. The antique Zippo,” said Sam.

And then, with a panicky note to his voice…”Show me the Colt.”

Dean looked away, a faint blush tinting his fair skin under the freckles.

“Dean, what did you do?”

Dean scuffed the gravel in the parking lot with his boot, just like a kid caught stealing from the cookie jar.

“There’s a Hunter-savvy pawnshop in town. Sold him some stuff outright that we didn’t need, the rest I pawned. Can earn the money back in a week, you know that. Can get it all back. Most of it. The guy’s honest, and the place is warded against thieves. Even has a cabinet to store big items.
Like a big-assed curse box. Then, did some shopping. Can’t have you going to your fancy school wearing rags, like we kept you locked up in a room in the attic.”

His voice broke, just a little.

“That’s what they’re going to think, right? That’s what you think?”

Sam grabbed Dean. Hugged him tight, burying his face in his neck. And, after a long pause, Dean hugged him back.

Both brothers were crying silently.

And, then Sam pulled back, looked at his big brother, and kissed him.

And Dean kissed him back.

Both brothers always will remember that kiss, and not because it was spectacular, but because it was a first. The first time, as adults, they kissed, with deliberate meaning and purpose.

It was Sam who broke contact and leaned into his brother’s embrace.

“Come with me, De,” said Sam.

The anger Dean felt had vanished as soon as Sam had touched him. And the kiss had finished the healing.

Dean pushed Sam away, gently.

“Dad. He…he needs me right now. This hit him hard. I’ll stay with him. But…we’ll talk, Sammy, right? I’ll come and visit. Maybe…”

Sam stepped back. He clenched his fists.

Dean surged forward and kissed Sam again, quick and fierce.

“Gotta go, Sammy,” he said. And, he was gone, Baby fishtailing through the parking lot, spraying gravel, and heading back towards the edge of town. Checking back into the motel. Back to the friendly BBQ bar and grill. And the Winchester version of a wake: hustling politicians, lobbyists, and visiting petitioners while drinking through the bar’s top shelf, three shots at a time.

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Sam called Cecilia when he knew she would be home from work. He fell apart while telling her what happened. Hadn’t called Bobby or Rufus or the rest of his extended Hunter family. Figured Ax, that cowboy Adept, was spreading the word. Figured he would hear from them soon enough.

She made it clear he could stay with her as long as he wanted. Would pick him up, even if she had to take time out from work. Unheard of.

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Sam knew it was over. Bridges burned. No fix, except maybe time. He also knew to cut the ties would take an emotion as strong as love. He would have to hate John and Dean for a while. And for the first time in his life, he stopped believing in the soul bond. Like the old joke about atheists, that even though the atheist does not believe in God, God still believes in the atheist.
The bus driver eyed the extra luggage suspiciously, but it was years before 9/11, so he tagged them for San Francisco and loaded them underneath the bus in the baggage compartment with Sam’s old Army surplus duffel. Without comment. Took the extra money and the generous tip. Sam kept the bag with the donuts and candy bars, and a couple of cans of soda with him.

Boarded the bus. got settled, took out the Strunk’s, and headed off with new determination into the future.

Chapter End Notes

I promised two endings, one bittersweet and one happy ever after. The angst is over. I think you will like the finale in the next chapter. And am revealing a little bit more about Winchester soul bonds, which won't surprise anyone. And then an epilogue.

[I lied. The Muse demanded that the next chapter be the transition between Sam, the love struck teen, and Sam, the man seeking a normal life despite the pull of the Family Business. How Sam justified severing ties with his brother, father, and the Hunter's life. But the final chapter is the Happy Ending. Swear to Chuck. Practically, this next chapter was getting too big for my taste; needed to chop it in two.

Already have timestamps written out. Wanted a happy ending for Cecilia. And a little more about Sammy's interactions with helpful adults.

I plucked John's deadly smile from Jeffrey Dean Morgan's persona in The Good Wife. Zombie shows are not to my taste. Regardless, the man does smoldering psycho nicely.
Rewrite

Chapter Summary

Sam makes the adjustment to Stanford, with Cecilia's and Bobby's help. And we learn how the canon we knew from Chuck's books was created, the one where Sam wanted "normal".

Chapter Notes

Some folks might consider this chapter dreaded "filler". It was meant to be the happy ending, but the Muse wrote too much, and I have a preference for shorter chapters. So, it is about the healing time Sam spent with Cecilia before he started at Stanford and how helping her made him feel better. How he made himself fall out of love with Dean. No secret pining.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Redwood City, California - 2001

Forty-eight hours later, Cecilia picked up Sam in her black Honda SUV, circa 1995. Her first day away from work, in forever. He tossed his duffel bag and the new luggage in the back, clutching the now battered paper bag filled with power bars, apples, and peanuts and the newly dog-eared copy of the *Strunk* style manual, which he read through enough times to memorize. Climbed in and gave her a quick one-handed hug before they drove off.

Sam was sure the bus had stopped at every zip code between Topeka and San Francisco. When they had arrived at the station in downtown Denver, he fantasized for a moment that John would be waiting for him, and all would be forgiven. Then he remembered the names his father had called him, and the warm feelings froze and shattered to dust at his feet.

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The young Hunter felt safe in the familiar apartment. And consequently fell apart. Cried and slept for three days under a pile of blankets on the fold-out couch, reverting to the emotional level of a hormone-battered preteen suffering through his first broken heart.

Cecilia reverted to Full-Press Mom mode. She was there with tissues and ice cream and comfort meals from her Appalachian childhood. First time she had cooked in years. Fried chicken and cheese grits, fried catfish and hush puppies, and ham steaks and slow-cooked pinto beans. Bread pudding and derby pie. And a big salad with fresh tomatoes and blue cheese crumbles at every lunch and dinner.

Sam inhaled everything. And damned if he didn’t grow another inch, Cecilia would have sworn.

Bobby showed up the fourth day with a cooler’s worth of beer and a bag of favorite snack food treats from the brothers’ lives on the road. He dried Sam’s tears and drove him to a small seaside
park facing the ocean, mostly rocks and sea grass. They sat on a salt-worn bench on a forgotten path and drank, ignoring the state’s liquor laws regarding underage drinking.

To the rare passers-by, they looked like father and son: the way they sat, the shared looks on their faces as they talked, how the older man seemed to shelter the younger man’s body from the wind. Their connection.

Talked about the aftermath of the cursed storm and the scattered remaining members of the Black Coven, new Wendigo activity in northern Ontario, and artifacts from Paraguay that Pastor Jim wanted to show Sam when he visited.

What kind of wards Sam planned to employ, just in case some creatures decided to track down a lone Winchester for revenge and glory. Where to hide a gun or three, and his worrisome collection of throwing knives, in a dorm room surrounded by nosy neighbors indifferent to the concepts of privacy and property rights.

Just happened to have a congratulatory present from the good pastor: a woven lambskin bracelet. The leather was vegetable-tanned with the bark from a holy Pedunculate Oak, known in the Sacred Isles as the “King of Trees”, and decorated with small metal and glass beads that were stitched in place with silver and silk filaments as fine as a human hair.

It was designed to test for the inhumanity of a suspicious stranger in situations where discretion was needed.

The metal beads were crafted of silver, iron, gold, and bronze and stamped with tiny but powerful sigils. Touch the skin of a vulnerable monster; it would feel to it like a bee sting and leave a similar wound. Not debilitating but enough to determine if Sam was dealing with an overly friendly coed, a shifter, or a siren.

The molded glass beads, embossed with the Seal of Solomon, contained tiny globes filled with holy water that were seasoned with salt from the Dead Sea. (After the discovery of the Leviathans’ weakness, beads filled with boric acid solution were added to the mix.)

The glass ornaments were not as fragile as they looked–protected from breakage with a simple spell that evoked Christo, Allah, and Yahweh in a single sentence. Repeated to click the warding on and off, like a light switch. The invocation was assumed to be safe from accidentally being spoken (except perhaps in a World Religions freshman seminar).

The words were their own test for demons and such. Then, they opened a single glass bead on a suspect’s wrist or arm. The bead would dissolve, leaving no trace of the glass, but it would burn a demon’s skin like the end of a glowing cigarette.

Sam used the bracelet on his roommate Brady before the poor kid was possessed; it never occurred to him to try again. The demonic watchdogs at Stanford were careful to avoid touching it. But, by his sophomore year, Sam had put the bracelet in a curse box for safekeeping. It survived the fire, along with the throwing knives and several other protected objects.

Dean stashed the box in the Impala’s trunk. Sam unearthed it after Meg was revealed to be a demon, but only wore it thereafter for special cases.

Kept it safe from Bela Talbot’s avarice. Before he jumped into the cage, he took it off and left it in Baby’s glove compartment. Did not put it back on until his soul, albeit damaged, was retrieved, still only when a hunt warranted undercover work.
After Dean saved the World again and Sam was rescued from the Men of Letters, he never took it off. Clung like a second skin.

Every few years he would find an Adept who had the skills to make and attach replacement beads.

Sam and Bobby spent a good hour admiring it and discussing its manufacture and provenance. The older hunter tied it to the younger Hunter’s left wrist, using the standard protocol of providing extra protection for the heart side.

Then they talked about Dean and John, but it wasn’t a long conversation. Bobby called John, but the Hunter wouldn’t pick up. Dean picked up once and hung up after shouting at Bobby incoherently. Bobby didn’t tell Sam that Dean was crying.

They drove back to Cecilia’s apartment, where she was waiting with the equivalent of a Christmas dinner, featuring a freshly butchered and plucked goose she ordered from a local kosher butcher shop. (One of the benefits of living near a university campus with an international population.) Stuffed with sausage and apples. Sides of red cabbage, potato pancakes, and Sam’s favorite salad. Cherry strudel for dessert. Imported Belgium beer, which Bobby said was mighty fine.

Bobby spent the night, kissed Cecilia good-bye in front of Sam, hugged him tight, and told him, sternly, not to be an idgit.

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For the next three months Sam divided his time between the Stanford campus and taking care of Cecilia. Made friends with teaching assistants and librarians, signed up for a couple of clubs (Ancient Languages and Pre-Law), watched the track team members in early practice and joined them for a couple of informal cross country runs, and wandered the halls of the different buildings as if he was scoping out a case.

One night he encountered the benign ghost of a Jesuit explorer and decided he was not going to salt-and-burn the bones; the entity liked to help stressed-out students make it through finals with whispered encouragements and advice about solving calculus conundrums.

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Cecilia flatly refused to accept money for rent. So Sam felt free to make it up to her in other ways. Filled her cupboard and refrigerator with healthy food, as a start. Cecilia told him it was just an excuse for Sam to investigate the Peninsula’s awesome farmers’ markets.

After a long talk with the landlord, which included gifting him with an Egyptian crocodile charm that cleared up his wife’s psoriasis in a week, Sam negotiated a discount in the rent to pay for the improvements he planned.

Cleaned and painted every room in the apartment with fresh colors. Repaired and cleaned windows, built and installed new screens, and replaced old light fixtures. The results bathed the apartment in healing light, day and night.

Ransacked the boxes shipped from her old house that she never opened, ones that never had left the storage area in the basement. Artwork and pretty lamps and colorful throw rugs and a kitchen’s worth of culinary tools. He became Decorator Sam for a weekend.

Enough time had passed so that seeing the relics of her old life, before, imbued with family memories, made Cecilia feel warm. Good. After an obligatory cathartic cry in the strong arms of
the young Hunter.

Sam tuned up the old Honda; Dean would have been proud. Used part of his stash to buy nicer furniture, over her loud and mostly ignored protests.

Went with her to work, made friends with a couple of her co-workers, Adrienne and Candace, tough and competent social workers like Cecilia. They would try and fail to embarrass the teenager with a running commentary that would have made a longshoreman blush. Fortunately for Sam, years hanging out at Hunter bars and living with his puerile older brother prepared him for the black humor of the two investigators.

One day the two women and Sam, with the boss’s approval, kidnapped Cecilia on a slow day in July and went clothes shopping.

Cecilia was prematurely old, her body plump and baggy. Her beautiful face, particularly her grey eyes, would never lose the look of someone who had lived through a nightmare, the kind from which you never wake up. She lived in sweats and ill-fitting jeans and owned one threadbare, hopsack jacket, which she would throw on if she needed to attend an official event.

But her silvery hair was thick, and her skin, blessed with good genes, had regained the dewy glow of her beauty queen youth with little effort, once Sam improved her diet and bought her a gift basket of lotions and bubble bath. Another small step towards repaying her kindesses.

(Dean would have had a fit and teased little brother “Samantha” mercilessly. Sam added his memory of Dean’s pranks to the list of reasons that moving to California was a good idea. He intended to make the list as long as possible.)

Sam brought a wad of twenties and hundreds to “Cecilia’s Day Off” and played the character of the rich male ingénue from a Depression-era musical, lolling in a chair with a cup of decent coffee and a law book in his lap. Just needed a fedora and a Gatsby-styled shirt to complete the role. He provided an enthusiastic audience for their impromptu fashion shows in a half-dozen better department stores and boutiques.

At first Cecilia was tight-lipped and withdrawn, not fussing since she wanted to make Sam happy, but feeling exposed with all of the attention and the young Hunter’s generosity.

Adrienne dumped Cecilia’s sweats in a trash barrel in a workroom at the first stop, making her a temporary prisoner, in her sprung and worn-to-colorless underwear, in the dressing room. She and buddy Candace, like those television fashion mavens, told Cecilia that as long as Sam’s money held out, they were set on helping her create a practical and stylish wardrobe of work clothes, including suits and dresses for court hearings and meetings with district attorneys and guardians ad litem and more casual outfits for site visits. Starting with new undies.

Cecilia was respected in the city and county for the work she did on behalf of children and families. Wanted how she looked to those government officials and the legal profession and local media to reflect the respect and trust she had earned.

After the third store, Cecilia started to come to life. She had opinions, it turned out, educated opinions, actually, from her pageant days, about tailoring and fabric and which styles would look best on her older body, which had morphed from willowy to semi-dumpling in the years since Bobby and Rufus saved her and she had watched them burn the bodies of her husband and daughters.

She knew her “color palette” had moved from a golden “summer” to a cool “winter”. Remembered
that back in those boxes in the storage area were scarves and shoes and jewelry. Knew which pieces would still work and what she needed to complete her new look.

For the first time since she and her husband drove to the truck stop looking for their girls, she was thinking about something for herself.

Sam grinned as he watched her become the woman she had been, at least for a few hours, while she and her friends fussed over grey silk and pewter earrings.

The first time one of the cops she knew from old juvie busts came into the office after the shopping spree and wolf-whistled at her, she punched him in the arm hard enough to leave a disabling bruise. (Thanks, Sam, for those self-defense lessons.) He came back the next week, apologized contritely, and asked her out for coffee. She said no, but couldn't say it didn't feel a little bit good. Creepy, pervy even, but a little bit good.

Looking back at those months of building a better world for the dedicated social worker, Sam realized years later that he was channeling Dean and how his brother took care of him. Protected him. Made him feel loved.

When he finally moved on campus, he kept a promise to Cecilia, returning once a month for movie nights with rom-coms and ice cream sundaes, even during the time he was with Jessica. Hiding out off campus when he needed a quiet place to cram for finals.

Cecilia stopped asking about Dean and John after the first year.

Memory is a painting, not a photograph.

Lost in the Mirror, Richard Moskovitz, M.D.

A phenomenon that became Hunter canon early on had to do with the selective amnesia of most civilians who encountered the Supernatural. Without the need for a Men in Black “neuralyzer”, the victims, participants, and bystanders in horrific events, even law enforcement, were quick to rationalize and forget what happened, at least consciously. The nightmares took longer to fade.

Only a few became Talismen or Hunters. Those grateful or driven. The ones who couldn’t forget and who tried to find salvation in helping others.

A schmaltzy romantic novel written in the fifties used a version of civilian amnesia to close the arc in its rambling plot. A young woman has a passionate affair with a charismatic but fundamentally flawed actor and writer. She ends up marrying an emotionally safe, practical man who loves her, and years later she has rewritten her story. Never loved the actor. Never wanted anything more than what she had.

Sam went through a similar metamorphosis. To sever the emotional ties with his brother and father he rewrote his personal history. He justified the shift by convincing himself that with his superior intelligence he could apply rationality to a clinical assessment of his family relations. Yeah, he was that smug.

(Remember, he was a genius, but an eighteen-year-old genius, with limited experience with people and normal family life. And had not yet evolved that good-humored ability to understand and forgive his own flaws and limitations, which is part of growing up and becoming a Mensch: a man
in the spiritual sense of the word.)

He decided that the rise and destruction of Colossus and the Black Coven were not world-changing events for him. Just another case, the importance of which was intensified by the mood swings common in his age bracket.

And, the need to help his family was just his trying to be nice. He rewrote seven years of his life to accommodate the new and improved “Normal” trope. He wanted to be normal. Wanted to escape the Hunter life and the family business. Wanted to become a corporate lawyer and get rich. Marry a nice girl. Have kids and a couple of dogs. Maybe not a picket fence, but a nice house with nice things. The canon we learned from Chuck’s novels.

And, yeah, maybe send his crazy father and brother a money order now and again when he was rich and successful. (As mentioned before, a law degree from Stanford was a ticket to guaranteed career success after graduation.) Buy Bobby and Rufus and the rest of his extended family something special once in a while, just like Dean did after his visits to those mysterious big-city pool halls, the ones where he refused to let Sam come with him to play with strangers and sharp things at the dartboards and pool tables. Dean said it wasn’t safe.

And what about the soul bond? In his rebooted version of Sammy and Sam, the bond was a cornball myth, something to inspire the mawkish sentimental ravings of drunken Hunters when they sought escape from their occupational loneliness.

And his feelings for his brother?

He admitted the indisputable fact that Dean was handsome and magnetic, alluring, even. Dad was very good-looking, and Mom had been a beauty, so what’s the surprise?

Sam had to slog through the awkward stages of growing up, a runt at ten and chubby at twelve and back to runt, sort of a late bloomer, then shooting up the last couple of years, too skinny, too tall, too fast.

Dean, on the other hand, always looked good. Solid. He had the bones. Would look this good in 30 years, if he didn’t drink himself into a devolved, more primitive state, like the cackle* of trolls that hung around the bathroom doors at the dicier truck stops. Sam assumed that they were ghouls who had lost the ability to mask their true nature from humans.

But somehow Sam figured his brother would look amazing regardless of how much he drank and the Hunter’s Life in general. (Should remember to ask Missouri someday if Dean was blessed in his crib by fairy godmothers.)

*[Cackle is the collective noun for hyenas. Dean, Sam, Pastor Jim, and Bobby once spent a snowbound evening in Blue Earth, fueled by spiked eggnog, coming up with the appropriate nomenclature for the monster world. Dean had too much fun getting a 14-year-old Sammy tipsy that night. Pastor Jim and Bobby looked on, pretending to be angry with him for “corrupting youth”. But they knew Dean would cut off his own arm before he hurt his little brother, so drinking with family at the holidays in the snug living room in the well-warded rectory? Not a big deal.

Sam woke up the next morning in the arms of his brother, wrapped in layers of sweet-smelling quilts the good cleric had dredged up from a cedar chest in his bedroom. Dean snored in his ear. Sam lay still and thought at the time that this was what Heaven would be like.]

But Sam, with his delusions of newfound maturity and what he thought were a fresh set of logical
lenses on the world, conceded that being brought up in each other’s pockets, with few opportunities to hang out with people their own age for more than a week at a time, was not conducive to finding suitable romantic partners. And what Sam felt for his older brother was no more than a crush. And those feelings were evaporating in the warm California sun.

By the time his first semester started in early September, Sam was surreptitiously checking out the uniformly good-looking women (and men) on campus. And being checked out as well.

Chapter End Notes

Once upon a time, I fell in love. Was engaged to be married. And it fell apart, and I moved a thousand miles away. I knew at the time that I needed to hate my ex in order to sever the bond we had and so we both could move on. Told him as much. It worked. Like a high amputation, but at the time it was the right thing to do.

Both hate and love are about intense attraction. For me, it was easier to move from hate to benign indifference than from love.

Good news. We both married the right people and became and stayed friends, many years later. The difference between Sam and me is that I did not pretend I was being rational.

The happy ending is up next. No smut in this work - just love and romance. I warned you from the beginning.
Paradise - Part One

Chapter Summary

Summary: The principles for regenerating a damaged ecology and a damaged relationship are parallel. Whether a mountainside leveled by a volcanic blast or a heart damaged by the untimely telling of a difficult truth, there has to exist something fundamental for Life to return. Something called Love. Something called Home.

Let’s be honest: The boys are going to get back together and live happily ever after. The question is how.

Chapter Notes

This work is finished; will be posting a chapter or more a day. Will erase this note when it is completed

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sunflower is one of many plants that are now known to aid in “phytoremediation,”

a process that employs various types of plants to remove, transfer, stabilize,

and/or destroy contaminants in the soil, water and air.

The Farmer’s Almanac, June 2012

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Two years after the eruption, scientists found the first plant on the Pumice Plain.

Prairie lupine (Lupinus lepidus) is a hardy subalpine plant adapted to the upper slopes of Mount St. Helens.

Prairie lupine is a particularly successful colonizer because of its ability to obtain nitrogen through an association with nitrogen-fixing bacteria on its root.

The lupines grew together into a dense mat and each fall dropped leaves adding nitrogen and organic matter to the pumice. When a lupine died it left behind a net-like structure of dead stems that helped trap windblown seeds and provided a favorable seedbed for colonization of other plant species. The lupine, thus, helped pave the way for the establishment of other plant species that followed.

Mount St. Helens Science and Learning Center
When Sam first returned to Cecilia that summer before he started his first semester at Stanford, her
neighbors was fussing with the news that the abandoned gas station and garage on the corner had
been purchased. Would have been snapped up by real estate developers years before but the lot was
an odd shape, and the zoning was hinky. So it sat.

For years its empty lot—the submerged tanks had been excavated and removed a decade before—had
been a convenient place to stash the overflow of extra cars from parties and visiting relatives in a
city block where every parking place was a well-guarded treasure.

There was some grumbling about change and inconvenience, and “Who do they think they are.”

_They_ turned out to be a family of blue-eyed Russians, the Sokolovs, who had immigrated to the
United States fifteen years before.

The mother, Sonia, was a physicist. With formal sponsorships and leverage in the international
academic community, she managed to crack the code, meaning find a faculty position at Stanford
University.

Brilliant and respected. A fine amateur artist and musician. In another life would have been a
painter. Dressed more like a 1950s beatnik than a scientist. Loved the patterns she uncovered in
mathematics.

Her husband, Daniel, had been an electrical engineer in the old country. He cheerfully started at
the bottom of the work ladder, willing to take on odd jobs on random construction sites. Qualified
for an apprenticeship program and become a union electrician. Loved the freedom to work long
hours for decent pay.

The children, two boys and a girl, had acclimated quickly to life in a college town, grew up, and
were focused on studies and their budding careers in accounting, medicine, and architecture. They
had long since Americanized their names and were John, Charles, and Lara to classmates and
friends.

And then there was the grandmother, Irina, a Central Casting cliché of a Russian babushka.

Grumpy. Sullen. Spoke several languages but would “lose” her English if it suited her. Hated the
Communist government, mistrusted all governments and institutions actually, loved her native
country, adored her family, and secretly liked the United States, which she would never admit,
even after 15 years.

Made sure that no one within the sound of her voice or the reach of her long wooden spoon went
hungry. Her grandchildren would bring friends home for dinner, knowing their grandmother would
frown and grumble even while turning out caldrons of beef borscht and platters of slow-cooked
brisket, quarts of fresh tomato, cucumber, and dill salads, giant loaves of rye bread, lidded canisters
of home-fermented spreadable soft cheeses, and cut glass trifle bowls, like exotic tributes to ancient
woodland gods, filled with fingers of sponge cakes soaked in honey or rose water or sherry and
layered in custard, candied fruit, and whipped cream.

Always with something to send home or back to a dorm.

Convinced Americans starved their children.

The property was Daniel’s dream: a bakery and restaurant. He, along with his mother-in-law and
children, spent evenings and weekends for months turning the empty buildings into a commercial
kitchen, sit-down dining area, and a walk-up/drive-through window for quick caffeine orders and pick-ups. Bare bones, with exposed brick walls, wood floors dark with age, track lights, and painted wooden furniture. At first glance, just another California fern bar.

They called the place *The Rose* and found a cheap source for posters of botanical illustrations to frame and decorate the walls. Red and yellow rose bushes, cradled in giant flower pots painted blue, guarded the entrance.

Sonia put flyers up on campus and used her artistic skills to paint the signs, inside and out.

The first stage: a breakfast café and takeout counter for coffee and pastries. Pretty much a success from day one. Good coffee, scented teas–recipes from their family–compounded with orange rind and spices and flowers, and buttery pastries to die for. The property was ready for immediate expansion, but the family, like most immigrants, was fiscally conservative. Willing to bootstrap, one step at a time. Money in the bank before they would add to the hours or the menu.

And then there was the garden. Irina was the daughter and granddaughter of farmers, and she had the touch. For her, Palo Alto, with its warm, dry summers and cool, wet winters, was Eden. So her task was to turn the neglected back lot into Paradise.

Fat chance, said the Greek chorus of neighbors. The unpaved space in the rear had been no better than a salvage yard. Broken cars had sat on the dirt dripping toxic fluids into the ground for years. A mini hazardous waste dump.

(Sam detected more than a little class conflict in the disparaging language used to describe the previous owners. And, of course, Bobby Singer’s property had been the brothers’ favorite playground, and Bobby was his favorite person, next to Dean. So, he bristled at the casual cruelty of some of the remarks he heard from informal groups of residents, gathered in front of driveways and mailboxes, exchanging the local news of the day before and after work.)

Even though the property had been scrubbed and given the blessing of local government for commercial use, the soil was poisoned. Nothing would grow, not the rankest of weeds, even in the Golden State sunshine.

Sam had started his classes and was visiting Cecilia for his monthly Sunday dinner. One evening, he wandered down to *The Rose* for a box of filled pastries to bring back to the dorm. (The family already was extending their hours for Sunday brunch.) He stopped to watch Irina at work at the back of the property.

The empty space was surrounded by a rickety day-glow orange plastic fence, waist-high, covered with warning signs.

The old Russian woman never wore slacks or jeans, only long blue and purple paisley dresses, a bulky black sweater, and a flowered scarf over her thick silver curls. She had been combing the dark, tarry-looking topsoil in the empty lot with a mean-looking, fixed-tooth rake.

A large burlap bag slumped at her feet. She plucked handfuls of black seeds from its depths and threw them into the air in sweeping arcs. They landed perfectly spaced. She lightly raked the soil to cover the seeds, then carried the bag and rake to another section, and began again.

“What are you planting?” asked Sam.

He introduced himself to the old woman. She said nothing and kept working.

He already had heard the gossip that the best the Sokolovs would be able to do is to pave the space
over and create a brick and concrete patio with container plants. A practical solution.

Irina stopped and squinted at the tall young man with the long bangs. Something in his face satisfied her.

“Sunflowers,” she said, and continued.

Sam waited until she was finished and moved forward to help her. She took the empty bag and rake to the plastic fence, waved the young Hunter off, stepped on the top of the fence and over. Let the plastic webbing bounce back as she walked into the parking lot.

A fact tickled at the back of Sam’s oversized brain.

“Sunflowers. They purify the soil,” said Sam, and Irina looked pleased.

“And lupines,” he continued. “They build the soil. Used as a cover crop in places where the ground is dead. Can pull nitrogen from the air.”

“Yes, but it takes time,” said Irina.

She waved in the direction of the plot. The surface, under a thin coat of soil, was pebbled with hundreds of small, black lumps.

“Most of these seeds, they won’t sprout the first year. And the ones that do, many will die. So I plant again and again and again. Might take two, three years. Or more.

She muttered something in Russian. Looked up at Sam with a rare smile.

“Tolstoy. ‘The two most powerful warriors are patience and time.’

“The insects will come to spread the pollen, to nibble at the leaves and flowers. The birds will come to eat the seeds.

“Every season, I will chop down the stalks of the worn out sunflowers and plow them into the dead soil. And sow again. Twice a year. Maybe more. This is California. Will try different seeds: red poppies and blue flax and cornflowers.

“One out of fifty will take root. Those will find pockets of clean soil and grow.

“And I will know it is working because more seeds will find their way here, blown in on the breezes, washed in by the rain. Carried by birds and little furry creatures. And more will take root.

“I will plant sea grasses and bulbs. They are tough. More sunflowers. Flowering vines. And eventually roses. And some day, it will be beautiful.

“Yes, today the soil is poison. But I don’t wait for it to be good. I don’t wait for God.”

She spit the Supreme Being’s name out as if she was cursing. Not much faith in the spiritual world after what she had seen and experienced in the old country.

“And always I will have sun and rain, the moon and stars, the tides and the seasons. The healing power of the sunflowers. And...this garden has me. In dry weather, I will carry water. Will bring good soil. Make good soil from the kitchen.”

The old woman stood up tall, Mother Russia incarnate.
“I did not survive by giving up.”

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A week before that fateful Halloween, four years later, Sam finished dinner with Cecilia, who was fussing over him as usual, and her new husband, David, a dentist whom she had met during a Supernatural case. Although his surrogate mom had moved out of the neighborhood years before, The Rose, now open for dinner seven days a week, had become their special place.

They had reserved their favorite table on the patio, overlooking Paradise, the locals’ nickname for the now lush garden. David, who came from a Talismen network in San Francisco, had met Sam at the wedding, and quickly became a fan of the former young Hunter. Did not judge his leaving the life and was supportive of his new career path. Lavish with his praise, which Sam basked in.

Irina, a little thinner, a little more bent, a little more gray, delivered their drinks and a box of pistachio baklava–Jessica’s favorite–to celebrate Samuel’s success. Something for him to take home to his girlfriend. She had watched the boy grow up the last four years A tall, broad-shouldered man. A good man.

The old woman was not an atheist; she just did not trust how God took care of his beautiful Garden. Thought, correctly, she could do better.

Silently prayed to powers older than Chuck to bless Samuel and keep him safe. Maybe it did some good.

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The happy young couple had moved into the pretty rental house off campus as they prepared for graduate school. No one knew about the ring hidden deep in Sam’s book bag, locked up in his enchanted pencil case, the one the psychic Missouri had given little Sammy decades before.

Sometimes Sam brought Jessica with him to see Cecilia and David, but the situation still was awkward for the younger Winchester. He had yet to tell Jess the truth about the Family Business. Maybe never would. Conversations were somewhat constrained–Cecilia and David knew how to keep secrets–but the two women always found common ground discussing public health issues and their shared affection for Sam.

Cecilia and David were not his only links to his old life. Bobby stopped by at least once each year, even after Cecilia was married, regularly bringing gifts from friends in the Hunter community for Sam’s birthday and Christmas.

And although he never actually saw or heard the Impala or the truck, Sam could feel the distant presence of his father and brother on occasion. Figured they were checking in to make sure he was okay.

Maybe if his family had visited Sam face-to-face they would have uncovered Brady’s demonic possession, and the lives of the Winchester men would have taken a different turn. But with all of the forces of Heaven and Hell lined up to make the Apocalypse happen, Lucifer’s minions probably would have found a different route. Certainly, as longterm strategists, there would have been a Plan B. A Plan Z.

The Winchesters Brothers, Dean and Sam, were reunited as part of the conjoined conspiracies of the Archangel Brothers Lucifer and Michael and their respective constituencies. Needed to get our boys ready as vessels for the Last Battle, remember?
Neither the Morning Star nor the Right Hand of God seemed to care one way or another about the romantic destiny of two kids from Lawrence, Kansas.

Chapter End Notes

A little autobiography. Irina is pretty much my Russia grandmother including her grumpiness and distain for government and religion. I have a photo of her standing next to our apartment house in Chicago in the shade of a group of 16 foot tall sunflowers, which easily reached the second floor. Both my mom and grandmother were magical gardeners. Everything grew for them and grew well.

When we moved into our current house decades ago, I learned that the previous owners had removed the garage; the land where it stood in the back yard was vacant. And dead. As dead as the lot behind the Sokolov family restaurant. I planted sunflowers, the same type of black oilseeds that Irina used and chopped down the stalks in the fall. Took two years for the soil to be cleansed.

The line "I did not survive by giving up" came from my mother, but something my grandmother said many times in many ways.

Wanted Sam to have a non-Hunter model of perseverance.
Chapter Summary

Sam has a plan to make his garden bloom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wildlife is abundant around the site of the Chernobyl nuclear plant, despite the presence of radiation released by the world’s most catastrophic nuclear explosion nearly three decades ago, researchers have found.

The Guardian, October 2015

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The Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge is one of the largest urban refuges in the country and is home to more than 330 species of migratory and resident wildlife... established in part to preserve and protect more than 630 species of plants, as well as the rare xeric tallgrass prairie.

United States Fish and Wildlife Service

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After the [Yellowstone] Fires of 1988, scientists grew to find that even though much was burned down, due to the minerals in the ashes and the sunlight that was able to reach the forest floors after decades, the soil was enriched therefore allowing new plants to be born, which allowed more food for animals.

Yes, the fires of 1988 were made out by the media as being horrifying and life threatening to the park.

What people were not able to see was that the fires rejuvenated Yellowstone's wildlife and ecosystem.

Department of Earth Sciences, Montana State University. 2012
The name fireweed stems from its ability to colonize areas burned by fire rapidly. It was one of the first plants to appear after the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in 1980. Known as rosebay willowherb in Great Britain, fireweed quickly colonized burned ground after the bombing of London in World War II, bringing color to an otherwise grim landscape.

United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service

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In the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, where natural processes have been allowed to take place since 1980, the biological communities that have developed are highly varied with respect to species diversity, composition, and structure.

United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, 2015

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[Poppy] seeds need light to grow, so when they're buried in the earth, they can lay dormant for 80 years or even longer by some accounts, without blooming. Once soil is disturbed and the seeds come to light, poppies nobody knew existed can then bloom.

[Referring to the poppy fields of World War I in Western Europe.]

The Smithsonian, October 2016

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After Jessica’s death, Dean and Sam began the new chapter in their lives. Once you remember that Love and Hate are two sides of the same coin, the ongoing Winchester dance would make perfect sense. Frustrating, but logical.

Remember the Topeka, Kansas, motel during the Colossus crisis? Where Sam and Dean watched the broadcasts of the witches’ brew of tornadoes, while the storms were being tracked by weather satellites and high-altitude planes? Reporters, civilians, and trained observers standing in torrential rain under trembling awnings and creaking overhangs, with a darkening sky as a backdrop?

Sam noted at the time that it was useful receiving multiple views of the action, both from on high and on the ground.

What if you could watch the Winchester-centric Supernatural world from the height of an orbiting space station over these last 20 years, from the time of Sam’s leaving for Stanford until today, where we find ourselves in the summer of 2021 in the Men of Letters Bunker outside of Lebanon,
You might discover that the world appears to move as if on a pendulum, between Light and Dark, Salvation and Condemnation. Destruction and Rebirth. Alpha and Omega. The shared catalyst for change is Dean and/or Sam making one or more ill-considered decisions to save the beloved other brother, with the occasional really bad choice by their best buddy, the Angel Castiel.

But, if you moved in closer, watched the brothers individually and together day-by-day, the world wouldn’t be binary. Not either/or. Not obsession/indifference. Not hate/obliviousness. Not passion/emptiness.

The world is not a simple mathematical formula. There is more granulation, more textures, more nuances. Fewer straight lines. More fractals and asynchronicities.

The Big Picture is useful, but it is not the only picture. And when it comes to Love, it’s more complicated than Yes or No.

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When the brothers reunited to hunt for John together, Sam still was living the rewritten story of his relationship with his family and particularly Dean, the one he had edited to protect himself from heartbreak.

Imagine that the emotional territory that the Winchesters co-inhabited after Stanford was scorched earth, blasted by fire and poison. Imagine worst-case scenarios, like The Yellowstone Fires of 1988: 1.2 million acres, leaving a silent cemetery of thousands of blackened tree trunks. The direct blast force of the 1980 Mt. Saint Helens volcanic eruption devastated nearly 230 square miles.

Or…the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, a few miles from downtown Denver, Colorado. It was the site of decades of manufacturing, warehousing, and dumping pesticides, munitions, and generations’ worth of chemical weapons from mustard gas to sarin to napalm. It was described as 27 square miles of toxic horror and once called by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers “the most polluted piece of ground in America”.

And in 1986, Chernobyl: the world’s worst nuclear disaster still buffered by a 1000 square-mile exclusion zone across international borders.

The devastation left by flood and earthquake. Of battlefields, drenched in blood, in wars that bring nations to ground.

But…

One of Chuck’s miracles is how persistent Life is, in all its forms, and how quickly a scene of devastation can heal itself. Not perfectly, not uniformly, not “good as new”.

But hope can return even before the smoke clears, through trial and error.

Proof of concept.

Throw something—anything—up against the wall, and see what sticks.

The Russian grandmother Irina understood this, as do most people who manage to walk through and out of their versions of Hell and into a new day.

Some things always will be different after a major ecological disaster. Maybe a favorite flower no
longer blooms. A songbird that existed only because of a fragile microclimate created when the glaciers plowed the Upper Midwest and gave us the Great Lakes. Now vanished.

In the place of nostalgic favorites more and different flowers and birds than from before.

So, how do the boys find the way back, maybe to not the exact same place they were, but something different?

The foundation will always be Love, manifest as a perpetual reunion of the practical and the spiritual. The empty hand in greeting, the gift that shows someone listened and watched, paid attention, the shared work, forgiveness, and celebration.

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Dean loved Sam. Loves Sam. But, the wounds on the older brother’s soul from his time in Hell had not healed. Dean didn’t believe he could or should get to have his brother, so a deep and abiding Love was hidden under a broken chain of one-night stands, bad jokes, and a stunningly stupid series of lies, betrayals, and personal sacrifices on behalf of Sammy and the World. But Sammy first. Always Sammy.

Which ended up unleashing the Apocalypse, Lucifer, the Leviathan (well, yeah, that was on Castiel and Crowley, but Dean and Sam contributed), the Mark of Cain, Metatron, Demon Dean, Amara, Lucifer again, and Jack.

Love can be dangerous, even to innocent bystanders.

And every bad choice, every failure was proof, from Dean’s point of view, that he was right. He was not worthy. Regardless, every time, given the choice, he would die for his brother without hesitation again. Face down Chuck and Lucifer and Amara and the Styne family and the British Men of Letter and the rest. For Sammy.

(The world never believed his time with Lisa and Ben meant much, except as Dean in iconic caretaker mode. A poor substitute for what he pined for with Sam. Perhaps that year in Purgatory with Benny was, in some ways, the best year of his life. Clear purpose and friendship built on trust and survival, without the distraction of unrequited Love. The warrior’s life that Dean was bred and born for.)

During his time as a demon, his sybaritic pursuit of pleasure was casual and cruel with both men and women. Only Crowley’s constant chaperoning kept the former Righteous Man from outright rape and rampage.

Even the King of Hell was relieved when Dean was cured.

More reasons, Dean believed, never to approach his brother. Would never be clean. Never occurred to the Hunter that Love could purify him.

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Sam loved Dean. Loves Dean. Even when he convinced himself that he had to leave his brother and father. But the young Hunter was the Abomination poisoned with demon blood in his crib, sold out by his own mother, the Boy King of Hell, the Soulless Monster that attempted patricide to keep from being burdened with a conscience. Filled with regret and doubt and anger. Would never be clean. Would always be uncertain. The eternal, inadequate younger brother. Lies, betrayals, and sacrifices. Wanting to run away, to die, to find peace. His motivation to conduct the Trials was as much about personal extinction as it was about saving the world.
Not surprising that the brothers mirrored the same doubts. The same wounds to their spirits.

Amelia was just a pause, a finger on a line of type, holding Sam’s place in one chapter of the Book of the World because he thought Dean was gone forever.

Sam used the word “Love” to describe how he felt about her. But, did you notice that when the time came for him to decide where he wanted to be he slipped away so easily. Did not fight for Amelia when her husband returned, even though the veterinarian made it clear she wanted Sam.

Eileen seemed a plausible option. Sam might have talked himself into more if she hadn’t been murdered. But she would have known, with her quick Hunter wits, she would have figured it out, if she hadn’t already, and turned him down for anything more than a comfortable friendship.

Once in a while, Sam flirted. He would find a pretty woman, a kind woman, a grateful woman, but it still would be a one-night stand.

While he was soulless he was relentless. Both women and men. Sex–pleasure and release–was pursued with the same focus and intensity as when he hunted in those months, but it was just another physical function, like eating or exercise. Sex, per se, did not make him happy, even after he got his soul back and was healed.

For clarification, sex with people besides Dean did not make Sam happy. Dean made him happy even without any sex.

Sam would feel more joy from sitting in the front seat of the Impala with his brother, perhaps the most annoying being on the planet, than from what most people would consider great sex with a great person. More roller-coaster, close your eyes, catch your breath moments, even though most of their time together involved Sam bitch-facing and nagging, criticizing and scoffing, pranking and complaining, and the two boys, always boys, swapping insults and poking each other in the ribs, eating each other’s stashes of movie candy, and creating embarrassing scenarios in public places, just to see the other brother blush.

Despite their ragged history, Sam resigned himself to the fact that, like a Law of Physics, he was attached at the hip and heart to the man in the driver’s seat. And had decided, over and over, that he would devote himself to his older brother and their calling.

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However, Sam also decided not to settle for a permanent, monastic role in their Wagnerian epic.

He never forgot Irina and her garden. The patter of the black oil sunflower seeds hitting the ground like fat raindrops from a summer shower. Watching the sunflowers grow and blossom in the dead earth over time, checking them during his monthly visits to Cecilia. Irina, using a scythe–as if it were a seamless extension of her strong right arm–to hack down the tough six-foot stalks and chop them into pieces, then tilling the fragments into the earth with a long-handled hoe. More seeds. Over and over.

The first volunteer flowers arrived: lupines and bluebells and farewell to spring and dianthus, blown in as seeds from other people’s gardens. Weeds arrived, of course, which were yanked from the ground without mercy. And soon the soil became clean and rich, able to sustain the silver-haired woman’s vision.

One of the grown Sokolov children was helping pull bindweed one weekend. She told Sam that her grandmother thought of weeds as negative thoughts.
“If we complain to her about anything, she chastises us. ‘You live in America. You have no problems.’”

So, Sam would not give up on his brother. He was going to plant a beautiful garden in poisoned soil. And not wait for Chuck to mend their relationship.

Sam, once again, had a Plan.

Chapter End Notes

Another great quote from my grandmother:

“If we complain to her about anything, she chastises us. ‘You live in America. You have no problems.’”
Gravity

Chapter Summary

Sam takes the initiative.

If life is a work of music, healing happens between the notes where the melody rests.

Let’s assume—after Sam and Dean were reunited in Palo Alto when John went missing—that the younger Hunter would have done nothing overt or specific to mend the damage to his relationship with his family as a result of the surprise reveal in the Topeka motel—what happened just before he felt forced to leave for Stanford. Regardless, the soul bonds of Family and Love were still in place. Like sunlight and rain and tides. Like the moon and stars. Like that mystery force called Gravity tenuously holding the universe together after the Big Bang.

The frozen emotional earth between and around the three Winchester men, particularly the brothers, already had begun to thaw when Dean came to see Sam off at the bus station before he left Topeka for San Francisco.

After that rocky beginning, each time, when their relationship seemed hopeless, Sam and Dean forgave each other. And without trying, they purified and replenished their corner of their world, one square foot at a time.

If Sam was furious with Dean, Sam still brought him a cup of coffee. Even when Dean could barely look at Sam, Dean still tossed him a beer. Split a donut. Filled up the Impala. Charged the cell phones. Ran a load of each other’s laundry (and stole and wore each other’s favorite t-shirts).

Patched each other up and lied when they gave up the last of the good pain pills—the ones they steal from big city hospital emergency rooms, the ones with the big supply cabinets, so no one goes without.

“Hey, have another bottle in my duffel. You finish these off, bro.”

Searched the ends of the earth and Heaven and Hell and alternative realities and beyond to find a cure for the Big Bad of the Moment. Confronted Archangels, made deals with the King of Hell, the Devil, Death, various Reapers, Rowena, and very bad humans, argued with Chuck, and committed suicide, over and over.

Whatever it would take to save their brother, even when it meant risking the lives of humans they loved.

[Author’s note” Charlie, dear Charlie, comes to mind, except in my ‘verse, no one I love ever dies.]

In Idaho late one spring night, the brothers were attempting to tear off each other’s heads’ in a roadhouse parking lot. Rolling in gravel and mud, furious with each other over the latest series of mutual deceptions and betrayals, leaving bruises the size of their fists over scarred ribs.

However, Chuck could not help the trio of bad-boy bikers who showed up to taunt the brothers from the sidelines. Cracking wise about Sam’s silky hair and astonishing physique and long legs. Dean’s lips and jawline and eyes and ass…but not using nice words. Not mannerly. Not what you
might call compliments to be exchanged in polite company.

Both brothers stopped simultaneously and turned, as with one mind, to glare at the bikers.

“What the Hell did you just say about my brother?”.

Two hours later, in a motel 45 miles away, the Winchester siblings would spend the rest of the night gently rinsing bits of rock and dirt from each other’s torn-up knuckles and cleaning wounds with squirts of disinfectant soap. Soothing bruises with homeopathic lotions, applied with velvet-soft touches. Empting an entire box of butterfly bandages to close up deep cuts on foreheads and arms and shoulders. Laughing between winces and repeated mutterings of “Son of a bitch” and “Dean, you’re a fool.”

Realizing there was no one else they would rather share that moment with—that bloody, drunken, cracked rib, black-eyed, stupid, embarrassing moment.

And they’d do it again. And did.

(If Baby could “tsk” and roll her eyes, she would. Many times. Over the years, whenever she brought her Winchesters to Singer’s for a visit, Bobby and the Impala would have long conversations at night in the Sioux Falls salvage yard. Mostly talked about those Winchesters, mostly one-sided–she was and is a great listener–but someday, she’ll have a lot to say. Another tale. Our story today is about the idjits.)

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Every ordinary, act of friendship, no matter how insignificant, sunk into the barren ground, like Irina’s kitchen compost, a coffee can’s worth at a time. And even if it's only temporary, those acts of familial kindness shaped a piece of the boys’ shared landscape and made it better. Sculpted another piece of a good memory, which burrowed its roots down into bedrock and was never lost or forgotten.

And no matter how much new poison, in the form of new lies, was dumped onto the battleground of their relationship, like those steel barrels of Chuck-Knows-What that you find in abandoned rail yards and loading docks, on the edges of their lives the spiritual equivalent of fireweed and poppies would take root, at least for a season.

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Although both brothers would have several new rounds of stupid behavior waiting in the works, by the tenth year after Stanford Sam was over his denial of his passion for Dean. So, he began to sow, with purpose and intent, his version of black oil sunflower seeds and lupine. And, it wasn’t as difficult as he imagined.

He let himself love Dean, without reservation, just as when he was that 17-year-old boy, cuddled between silk and down in the attic of the enchanted barn, curled in his brother’ arms, feeling the soul bonds swirl around them, pulsing through the dozens of sigils kissed into the sacred oak walls.

Sam no longer pushed away unseemly feelings. He left concerns about incest and What Will Dead and Missing in Action John think by the side of their endless road.

First, Sam let himself look at Dean. Consciously crushing on the best man in the world, if you asked him. Over late breakfasts at diners, while the brothers hunted for cases and clues, pouring through local newspapers and squinting at their laptops.
Sam really looked at Dean, without reservation, so that the wait staff peeps gathered together at the cash register to point and smile, refilling their coffee mugs without asking, *no charge*, and sighing.

Finding excuses to see if there was *anything* they could do for these two men, just so Sam would look up and beam that same smile at them. So they could be caught up in the intensity of the moment as if they were the target of world-class unconditional want and adoration. The waiter or waitress who drew the long straw would nod, smile, and wobble back on elastic ankles to the little staff room behind the curtain next to the service counter.

And swoon.

Sam would assume that Dean was confused when he was not simply oblivious. Dean never was confused or oblivious. He still didn’t feel worthy, so thought it was best to ignore the implication that Sam’s weird staring meant anything more than his being a weird-ass hippie.)

In the Impala…before he fell asleep. Sam looked at his brother.

In the Bunker, over stacks of books. After successes. During reunions. During life-and-death yelling matches regarding strategy and tactics. Sam looked at Dean.

Even in front of Mary in later years. And even Crowley.

Sam let himself look, and he let himself smile with those blinding, Seven Wonders of the World, weaponized dimples. No holds barred. This was war.

And, once in a while, Dean smiled back and looked at Sam the way he used to look when he watched Sammy the Genius on their fake field trips while pretending to scout out liberal arts colleges, the ones that coincidentally had loose visitor policies and pie slices three deep under the cafeteria warming table lights.

Felt good for both of them to look and smile.

Mutual positive reinforcement. A silent version of “Good Boy” and a forbidden strip of crispy bacon for a job well done.

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Then, Sam let himself touch.

The boys always had been physical. Siblings, brothers in particular, are like puppies in a box. And since the first time Dean held baby Sammy in his stubby toddler arms, there had been that tangible bond.

The brothers shared a history of tight squeezes in diner booths, caverns dripping with the blood of mythical beasties, broken coffins, hell-built cages, prison cells, and hospital closets.

And, they had sparred and drilled and tripped each other up and pushed each other around since Sammy could walk. Wrestling and shoving and tumbling, arms and legs entwined in the mixed martial arts version of Celtic knots.

They had stitched each other up after countless battles, hands everywhere.

(Eventually, Castiel would warn the brothers that the ability of an Angel to heal had Rules and Limits, just like everything else in the Supernatural universes. As their vessels experienced the normal aging process, it would be harder to repair wounds and erase scars. Some things, with
effort, he could fix regardless of age. Like certain kinds of blindness. And chronic pain. He could stop bleeding, neutralize a poison, or remove a bullet or a tumor.

If the soul was pure, yes, it made things easier. Consequently, he could help animals better than he could even a saintly human.

But increasingly, regarding his Hunter best friends, damage would be permanent, unless the boys found a way for their physical human forms to become immortal. And yes, there would be a heavy price for that kind of transformation; there always would be.

Not recommended that they follow this dangerous train of thought. Immortality, he told them, is not all it's cracked up to be.

And no, Dean, he did not know where the Holy Grail, holding everlasting life as portrayed in the Indiana Jones movie, was hidden away. Or if it really existed. That was a movie, Dean. Even in our magical world, some things are just make-believe, the Angel told a disappointed Hunter.

So, as predicted, one year Dean began to limp, having had his leg broken in three places after plummeting two stories out the window of a stereotypical haunted orphanage. And there was nothing Castiel could do except alleviate the pain while the bones knit under a bulky cast.

And, during one of the Coolest ten minutes in a life of Cool, Sam got to wield Claire’s Grigori Angel sword in a battle with a griffin. Despite his skills with a blade, Sam’s face was raked with the burning tips of the creature’s claws. Dean banished it back to the steppes of the Gobi Desert with a White Witch spell he commissioned from a coven in Vermont–neither brother wanted the rare beast destroyed–before it could kill Sam or vice versa. The scars remained, making the taller Hunter look even more like a fey Prince of Darkness. Or a 1930s film pirate.

But now Sam’s touches were less random. The long arm across the back of the couch in the Bunker’s “entertainment room” on movie nights. The long fingers on Dean’s arm when they were drinking in a bar. The quick caress to brush dirt from his hair or a streak of someone or something else’s blood and gore from the side of his face.

A big step was telling Dean that his headaches had returned and could Dean please do that thing he did when they were kids, running his fingers through Sam’s hair. Really helped.

Dean hesitated. Got a pillow from his bedroom, a portable version of the sacred Memory Foam mattress. Sat at the far edge of the couch and placed it on his lap. Sam stretched out, sighed, and snuggled in. Chariots of Fire was playing on the big flattop screen, its seminal electronic soundtrack providing a soothing backdrop.

Sam closed his eyes. Thanked Dean.

Dean hesitated again. Placed his hand on Sam’s forehead and began threading his fingers through his brother’s hair. Within minutes, Sam was asleep, purring those soft rumbling snores from their childhood.

Dean dropped off ten minutes later. Castiel found them, gently draped an ancient soft blanket over Sam, and left. Dean awoke to the smell of coffee and toast wafting from the kitchen.

At least once a week, if they were in the Bunker and the World was not coming to a messy end, again, Sam would claim Dean’s lap without asking. And Dean was okay with that, because taking care of Sammy never grew old. And he noticed that he slept better on nights that his brother’s gentle snores were hammocking him into a restful state, like rocking on the deck of an enchanted
boat. Much like sleeping in the back seat of the Impala with his brother sheltered in his arms, as John rocketed through the endless night in search of revenge.

The first time Sam asked, shyly, if he could share Dean’s bed on the road (after Sam had called ahead, prebooked a room with two kings, and bribed the clerk into claiming it was the only room with two beds available), Dean stared at him suspiciously.

“Your head, Sammy? Again? Still? We need to get you checked out? Visions? You got some kind of hell-spawned disease I should be worrying about?”

“No, I think...I think it's like one of those pro athlete issues. Hell, Dean, how many times have you and I been manhandled and bounced off a wall like a fly ball? I had Cas check me out. No brain damage, but, like he said, we are getting older. If you don’t want me to cramp your style, no big deal. Two big beds, man. I can sleep fine alone. Forget I asked.”

And the World’s Most Dangerous Puppy Eyes glimmered for a moment. And Dean was lost.

“Big baby, come here,” said Dean.

Sam smiled and crawled on top of the covers, carefully putting his head on Dean’s chest, pressed up against his anti-possession tattoo. Was careful to wear boxers and sleep pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt. Nothing unseemly.

“What the hell now, Sammy,” Dean growled.

“Get under the goddam blankets.”

Sam hesitated. One beat, two beats, and then slowly slowly he rolled in and under, like a big sleepy bear.

And, this became the norm. For Sam to fall sleep in his brother’s arms, Dean's fingers tangled up in his sweet-smelling mane, both men floating in good dreams.

Sam stopped asking permission. One bed was now enough.

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Sam waited. He always was good at the Long Game.

Dean was drinking less. And somehow, without conscious intent, he had stopped burying his attraction for his younger brother in the soft, eager flesh of college professors, police officers, bartenders, and middle-aged divorcees who were working on their abs at the local coed health club and needed someone to spot them on the weights.

He let his desire for his Sam to strum through his body without the obvious conclusion. Until he spoke up one January in Colorado, when they were snowbound in a motel in Colorado Springs, one with a spectacular view of Pikes Peak behind the swirling veil of blowing snow. Watching a Lord of the Rings marathon from their shared bed, under three blankets. The room actually was quite cozy, but hearing the blizzard whine around the motel required the weight of layered wool to stay warm.

It was one of those rare occasions where Dean was resting his head on his little brother’s shoulder. Was pretending he didn’t notice, and Sam was pretending as well. Sam had his arm tucked around Dean, a featherweight presence. He was so happy that he thought this could be in the top three of his Scenes from Heaven with Dean. Maybe they could vote when the time came.
And then…

“I can’t,” said Dean.

“Can’t what?” asked Sam, but he knew. Forced himself not to move, not to tighten his grip on his
Dean’s shoulder. Couldn’t spook him now.

“Can’t give you what you deserve.”

Sam let himself breathe. Thought of Irina’s garden, from his last visit with Cecilia and David. It
was filled with climbing roses and lilies and beds of wildflowers. People held wedding parties on
that patio. Drove 30 miles to snap a family portrait. It was now Paradise, oh, and there happens to
be this awesome restaurant and bakery as well.

“Dean, you already give me what I want. And if this is it, man, I’m gold. I got you. Got the
hunting. Got our friends. We have a home. Love you, De. You don’t have to give me anything
else. But, can I ask someday, maybe, just in case you change your mind?”

Raised himself up and curled above his older brother. Traced a kiss across Dean’s cheek, and sunk
down again and, without effort, pulled him back against his chest. Dean settled in and let himself
sleep.

Sam meant every word. He could live with this, if this was all Dean could give him. The looks and
the touches. He would wait, satisfied. For now.

But a year later, he decided to try again.
The New Normal

Chapter Summary

Dean and Sam talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One day, Dean went to help Garth and Rufus with a Wendigo hunt in Michigan, which Dean agreed to because being in the same room as Garth and Rufus was, reliably, one of the most entertaining experiences of Dean’s cursed and blessed life, meaning hilarious.

Just stop and think about the most adorable of domesticated werewolves, the one with a sock puppet, and that crotchietiest of crotchety Hunters–those two men in the same, small motel room, let alone hunting together. Dean had taken to covertly videotaping their exchanges and broadcasting them to a select group of friends in the Life, starting with a grateful Bobby and Jody. Laughed until it hurt. Jody had to pound a wheezing Bobby back to functionality more than once. Best Date Nights ever.

Years later, Rufus found out and showed up at the Bunker to kill Dean, who had at the ready a bottle of Jack Blue to assuage the older Hunter’s homicidal tendencies. Garth, on the other hand, loved the clips and played them over and over for his family.

So Dean would be gone for a week. And Sam took advantage.

He broke out a clean notebook and sorted piles of grid-lined paper on the map table in the Situation Room of the Bunker. Laid out his favorite colored markers and pens and a compass and protractor, just for the heck of it. (Loved it when a very old-school prof at Stanford made his class make their own slide rules.)

Propped up a white board they reserved for complicated cases and an easel and a giant lined pad of yellow flip chart paper, the kind with the sticky edges. And sticky notes. In four colors.

And taped to the white board, for inspiration, his favorite photo of Dean, caught while he was laughing, full-bodied, at something Bobby had said while they were eating at a riverside diner in Milwaukee, the one with the lamb stew served with thick slices of soda bread, and Irish Harp on tap. And in the background played a loop of the same fifty songs by the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem. Kill the English. Get Drunk. Over and over.

Dean had a moustache of foam from a Guinness and a smear of stew on his chin. His head was thrown back a little, his mouth was open in a Dean grin, and he was lost in a moment of pure happiness. Hadn’t noticed Sam snap a photo while pretending to be taking a call from Ash.

The image was pinned in place front and center, blown-up large, murder-board style, as if Dean was a suspect in a manhunt on a prime-time television show. Circled in red.

Sam sat and stared at the photo of his brother. Beautiful. Joyful. The center of his universe. His reason to Be Happy.
The singular goal for the man who had figured out how to outwit Satan, destroy the Men of Letters’ base in the New World, and crack a hundred unsolvable Supernatural cases:

Make it as easy as possible for Dean to say yes to him.

As if he was plotting, singlehandedly, the invasion of Normandy Beach and coordinating the movements of 156,000 troops, Samuel Winchester wrote and wrote. Paced. Skimmed a thousand books in a dozen languages about the human heart, both fiction and nonfiction.

The fiction was more useful. More practical tactics. Reread every thing the French idol Colette wrote. Scanned the tales from One Thousand and One Nights. Greek myths. Epics in a half dozen tongues.


Barely slept.

By the end of the week, the map table and the floor were covered in discarded coffee cups, and a ream of paper had been wadded up into crushed balls.

The white board looked like a snapshot of an infected petri dish overflowing with multi-colored bacilli; images and icons and symbols that meant something to Sam, but he could not remember what. The photo of Dean mocked him.

And, the yellow sheets ripped from the flip chart pad on the easel were covered with lists. Strategies and tactics, prioritized. Color-coded and rewritten.

Tacked up, with blue drafting tape, onto every vertical surface. And in front of Sam was the final result. His best ideas, written in bullets. Prioritized.

Under the heading: Kidnapping Dean

Which he had crossed out and replaced with a row of question marks.

1. Lock D. in Bobby’s Panic Room. Ask Bobby to leave. Ask Jody to visit once a day, just in case.
4. Las Vegas. Penthouse. Bribe staff. (Nothing they haven’t seen before.)
7. Lake house. Door County, Wisconsin. Special wards and sigils compounded from Dean’s blood. Ask Pastor Jim for Maurice’s (the cougar/familiar’s) number.

And then, at last, Sam saw what he needed to see.

The big complicated plans collapsed on themselves into one pinpoint of blinding light, hanging in space. The reverse of the Big Bang. What some claim will be the End Time for this universe, before it explodes once again.
Took Sam a day to clean the map room and the Bunker. Shredded every scrap of paper and drove a truckload of stuffed brown paper leaf bags to a paper recycler. Put back all of the books. Dusted.

And baked two cherry pies. Baked apple muffins with cheese and bacon. Stocked up on beer and ice cream and picked up aged Kansas City strip steaks from Lebanon’s lone butcher. Bought popping corn and a pound of real butter.

And waited for Dean to return.

His older brother was filled with good cheer. Greeted Sam with a hug and a squeeze and did not draw back when Sam pecked him on the cheek. Glowed when he bit into one of the muffins and grinned like a kid when he found out that steak and pie a la mode were on the menu.

They sat on the couch, with good beer and a giant bowl of buttery popcorn, movie house style. Dean queued up the videos from the hunt with Garth and Rufus. The Wendigo was appropriately scary, and the two odd-couple Hunters were hysterically funny. Garth mugged for the camera when Rufus wasn’t looking. Sam snorted beer up his nose, and Dean choked on the popcorn more than once. The evening was a success.

They sat together, grinning like fools, chuckles rippling through the conversation as Dean shared the technical details of the Hunt.

“So, how about you, Sammy,” Dean said.

“Whatcha being doing?”

Sam took a steadying breath. Turned on the couch to face his brother. Took away the bowl of popcorn nestled in his lap.

Took his hand.

Dean went from happy to moderately terrified.

“You dying, Sammy?” he said. Pull the bandage off, quick, was still his preferred modus operandi.

“No, Dean. Actually, I'm very happy.”

Moderately terrified to confused. Tilted his head, reminiscent of Castiel.

“Dean, I love you. You know I love you. And I know you love me. You don’t think you deserve this…me, but you do. I have spent the last week trying to come up with a plan to convince you. Mostly involving Enochian handcuffs, warded rooms, and armed guards. But I am doing this instead. For once, I am going to use my words. We both are going to use our words."

Dean tried to pull away, but Sam held him fast.

“I am going to kiss you. Really kiss you. Our third real kiss. Now, if you decide it’s not what you want, it won’t go any further, and that’s okay. But know I am going to kiss you again and tell you the same thing next year. And the next. Until we are together in some version of the afterworld, and I have eternity to change your mind.

"I love you, and I want you."

Dean stared at Sam, and Sam saw the tears shine in Dean’s eyes, mirroring his.

“Sam…Sammy,” said Dean.
"I want you," he said.

"I won’t pretend. I do. But you deserve someone smart. Really smart. Someone with no baggage. Someone who didn’t spend thirty years in hell torturing souls. Someone who wasn’t a demon, scarred by the First Curse. Someone who doesn’t lie and cheat and steal. Someone who is clean, inside and out. The right person."

Dean looked desperate. Tried to yank his hand free again, but Sam would not let him budge.

And then Sam smiled.

“I don’t want smart or right. I want you.”

And he leaned in and kissed his brother. Properly. While he held his hand tight.

The universe held its breath, Heaven and Hell united.

And, Dean, after years of protesting, gave up. He kissed Sam back.

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The two men in the Montana diner had finished a breakfast big enough for five, had tipped lavishly to keep the booth through the lunch hour, and seemed to be settled in for the afternoon. The tabletop was covered with newspapers, a couple of notebooks, and a large leather briefcase, the kind lawyers use, stuffed with papers. On top of the paperwork they had unfolded a USGS topological survey map of the adjacent national forest. Said they were federal inspectors from the Department of the Interior, checking out abandoned mines.

Dark suits, white shirts, plain ties. But boots, not shoes for an office. Hands that looked like they were used to real work. Maybe field geologists before they had been kicked upstairs.

They were good-looking, broad-shouldered men, with nice manners, but that’s not what caught the attention of Sue, the stocky, widowed, middle-aged waitress who ran the shift.

It was how they looked at each other.

There is a rare smile that holds back nothing. Most folks smile as if smiles were endangered species or had an expiration date, or the store was going to run out of them by the end of the week. If they smile too much, too big, they won’t have any left for tomorrow. Will drain that hidden fountain of joy. Or be ridiculed or, worse yet, rejected. So most folks, they temper their smiles with practicality. Protect themselves from defeat. Hold the real smiles in reserve for a mythical day when they won’t be afraid.

But then there is the smile you see at weddings. At the birth of a child. At celebrations. At reunions. At the impossible good news in a hospital waiting room.

Sue would see that smile on the faces of newlyweds on their honeymoons. On parents taking their kids out for ice cream in honor of a really wonderful report card or the Little League win. Grandparents holding in their arms that little baby, the one that had the beautiful dark eyes of a long-departed sister.

In between talk of tailings and chemical signatures and pollution and some exaggerated talk of monsters—she thought the term was as an apt label referring to that rogue mining company, which had poisoned a nearby pristine trout stream a while back—she saw the men smile at each other.
Lean into each. The one with the impossible green eyes looked, as her late husband would say, fit to bust. The taller one, with the long hair and perfect smile, would take the other man’s hand once in a while in his, and give it a squeeze. They would grin and then focus back down on the map and papers.

She brought them more coffee and a plate of Russian teacake cookies, the kind made with chopped nuts that melt in your mouth, no charge. She saw the matching silver rings.

“Newlyweds?” she said. Surprised herself as the words left her mouth.

The men looked up at her, then smiled in unison.

The one with the green eyes spoke first.

“No ma’am,” he said.

“Guess we’ve been together forever.”

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Castiel loved to fly unhindered above the Earth. He would shed Jimmy Novak’s vessel, leaving it in a safe place. These days that meant suspending it in a sleep state in his permanent room in the Bunker in Lebanon.

That way the Seraph could more easily see and interact with celestial artifacts and events.

He never told Sam and Dean the truth about their soul bond. Figured that could wait until they were finally, once and for all time, done with their incarnations on Earth. Might take decades.

Meanwhile, Cas would float and watch the Bond, the True Bond of the Winchester Brothers, the one that Earth scientists had named a Van Allen radiation belt, which seemed to appear and vanish from sight for no reason. Watch it twist and pulse. Watch the two main loops dance, touch, retreat, and dance again. Love without end.

What the scientists didn’t know was that the Bond was always there and would always be there, even though their instruments couldn’t register its existence all the time.

Also, the scientists didn’t know that these loops, the True Bond of the brothers, in a very real way were what held the Earth together, this fragile, beautiful blue marble, a whim of Chuck, a whim of Nature. A lovely garden. The smaller image, the one that Sam and Dean and earthbound entities could see swirl around their corporeal bodies, was the reflected image of the Great True Bond, the Original, the One and Only, which was mumurating thousands of miles above their heads.

Protecting their Paradise, in Eternal Harmony.

Chapter End Notes

Billie said they were important.
Chapter Summary

The brothers return to Vermont and leave a gift for the old college guard, who found them a special place to sleep in an enchanted barn, many years ago.

Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoyed this version of what would be normal for the brothers. Plan to post some additional material.

Thank you!

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

They have to take you in.”

The Death of the Hired Man, Robert Frost

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Spruce Mountain, Vermont – Late September 2022

“Grandpa Joe, you have visitors.”

The middle-aged woman in the rolled-up jeans and men’s shirt waved the two men around to the backyard. A broad, raised wooden porch overlooked the edge of an impressive kitchen garden. It was surrounded by eight-foot pickets spaced two feet apart and completely barricaded with chicken wire, from the ground up and over a grid of two-by-fours across the top.

Someone had built a door into the side of the cage, wide enough for a good-sized wheelbarrow to push through. For now, it was closed. And safeguarded with a serious-looking bicycle lock.

“Raccoons, you know,” she said and shrugged. And then smiled.

“They have picklocks.”

The visitors grinned and nodded in agreement.

A very old man, skinny and frail, sat in a sturdy rocking chair on the porch. An ancient, one-eyed, black-and-white cat curled up on the faded red-and-blue Log Cabin quilt folded over his legs.

The man wore a ball cap washed to pale blue, a green canvas shirt, and jeans. Glasses with opaque, black lenses were perched on his nose, and by the side of his chair leaned a white cane. At his feet, a black almost-German Shepherd was snoring. Something shaggy with huge feet swam in its gene pool. The dog appeared oblivious to the hefty orange tabby sprawled over its massive back,
blissfully kneading his canine friend’s dark, furry pelt with white-socked paws.

As the two men approached the trio of animals raised their heads in unison; the one-eyed cat sniffed the air. The orange tabby jumped off of his comfy platform and on to the ground below the porch. Trotted up without hesitation, welcoming the men with the sweet chirp that momma moggies use to call their kittens or to seduce small prey.

Mean no harm, they are saying.

Both men were just south of middle age–hair streaked with silver. They had seen more than their share of killing frosts. (Being bathed periodically in the blood and guts of monsters can age you to your bones.)

Tanned faces, wrinkled around their eyes. The taller one with the shoulder length mane had three rivers of long, pale, forked scars slithering across his left cheek. The shorter one, still over six feet, hair cropped to military length, walked with a decided limp. Dressed like farmers. Like hunters. Plaid flannel over t-shirts, blue jeans, and broken-in work boots.

“Joe,” said the taller visitor in greeting, but before he could draw another breath, the old man held up his hand in the direction of his voice.

“Heard that black beauty pull up. Aren’t you Hunters supposed to be good at sneaking around? It’s you boys, right, Sam and Dean? Maybe not boys anymore. Dang, 20 years. More?”

Both men hoisted themselves up on the porch. Stepped around the napping dog and took turns bending down and giving the old guard a quick, one-armed hug without disturbing the old blind cat in his lap.

The granddaughter, whose name was Dana, had pulled two more chairs from inside the house; Sam held out his hands and took them from her, setting them down, facing Joe, on either side of his rocker, and the brothers sat.

Joe did the honors, introducing them to Henry the welcoming tabby, Malcolm the throw rug/dog hybrid, who turned out to have more than a little Newfoundland in its family tree, and, Costello, the surviving brother from the cats Joe had rescued a generation before. A blind, furry skeleton, but he purred when Dean leaned forward and chucked him under the chin.

“Malcolm’s my guard dog,” said Joe, and even Henry, his orange best friend, looked like it was a good joke.

Dana brought out lemonade and shortbread cookies and established that the brothers were staying for dinner. Would not hear anything but a yes. She knew who they were. Grew up with Hunter stories. Maybe not the right time to mention she was state police on a family hardship leave, looking after her granddad. Maybe after dinner. Had some questions about a couple of cold cases.

“Hope you like pork chops. Baked potatoes and salad and vegetables from the garden. Best tomatoes in the county. Can them with garlic and herbs for sauce; add an Anaheim or two for a little kick. Will give you a couple of jars when you go. Got a batch of late corn that’s ready. You can pick your own, if you like. Will steam it up for you as fast as you can trot from the garden to the kitchen. Heirlooms with real flavor, not the candy-cane-sweet hybrid crap. A friend brought us an early bushel of Northern Spys yesterday. I can whip up an apple pie for dessert, if you like.”

Dana looked them up and down, remembering her dad’s tale of a memorable meal.

“Maybe two,” she said.
They sat together in the golden light of the afternoon, soaking up the warmth of an Indian summer sun.

The conversation flowed easily. Sometimes you make a connection with someone, and the roots go deep. They picked up from where they left off twenty-plus years in the student center, talking about hunting and the Supernatural. Turning points. Small talk about family, who lived, who died.

Joe was sorry about John, sorry for the men and women in their lives he had never met.

Lefty and Freddy, his fellow guards at the college, were gone, as well as one of his sons. Tig and Max, the hounds, had died within a few days of each other. Just old age. Couldn’t live without each other. The brothers, of course, knew the feeling.

Abbott, Costello’s furry brother, disappeared one winter day; they found the bones the next spring. Buried them under a rose bush where he liked to nap. Costello sat at the front window of the farmhouse for weeks, looking out on the barnyard. Waiting for his brother to come home. Search for him at night around the property. The elderly cat was getting thin, and Joe was resigned to losing him as well.

Then, one day, without warning, the tuxedo cat claimed a spot under the rose bush, above his brother’s grave, where Joe had laid a sweet bed of mulched wood chips from an established sugar bush he was thinning. Seemed content and started eating again.

The brothers were doing more consulting now, a la Bobby and Pastor Jim, than hand-to-hand combat. Without drama and avoiding stories of tragedy, Sam and Dean took turns providing a few scenes from their adventures, the ones with a wow factor and even some humor.

Turned out Joe had been following their careers through his tightknit network of small-town law enforcement and retired military buddies. Made friends with a couple of local Hunters and an Adept, a shaman who conveniently was a degreeed and licensed druggist and owned a compounding pharmacy across the border in New Hampshire. On his own the shaman figured out the Leviathans’ scheme to control the population of North America with drugged fast food. He had come up with an antidote to protect his New England neighbors. If that time had come.

The brothers verified Joe’s intel and were impressed with what he knew.

“Seems like you boys have been busy,” the old guard said. “How many times you save the world? And Angels, huh. You had your hands full. Heaven and Hell have their own bureaucracies, it sounds like.

"Would like to meet an Angel, though. Sounds like that Castiel fellow was well-intended. Most people who want to be in charge of other people’s lives are. Mostly does not turn out so good, regardless."

Joe reassured them that despite the vivid television coverage, he knew the serial killer Leviathans who destroyed their reputations were not them. Just knew.

Joe’s big surprise for the brothers was regarding the local college, which, it turned out, had a long history of financial problems. Finally closed seven years ago. The buildings stood vacant for two years, but before a deal could be made with one of the big universities for a satellite campus/conference center, the trustees who managed the property got greedy.

A crew of opportunistic scavengers from Boston showed up with a pocketful of money. They hired...
local talent and dismantled the old buildings on the campus, harvesting a trailer-tractor load of the beautiful old wood and stone and glass and ironworks to cart down to Massachusetts and their restoration company’s warehouse, where they sold history to architects, builders, and wealthy homeowners.

“Don’t know how the resident ghosts felt about it. Don’t know which ones stayed here and which ones followed their earthly anchors to reside in fancy neighborhoods. Heard what they took ended up in Boston. New York City. Philly and Westport and Long Island. Bet it got interesting,” said Joe.

Explained some waves of spectral activity in urban New England and the Mid-Atlantic states that the brothers had gotten wind of, even in their semi-retirement.

Last, the parasites—Joe had not run out of words to describe his rancor toward the invaders—dismantled the barn: the Crown Jewel. The jackals and hyenas—the nicest thing Joe had to say about the pillagers so far—salivated over the treasure trove of maple and oak paneling. Centuries old but somehow, the looters remarked, maintained in pristine condition.

Fortunately, Joe and his buddies, part of the institutional memory of the county, had informed the local historical society of the papers and relics in the attic. A local team of retired scholars, including professors who over the years had made the town their permanent home, and an archivist from the state library in Montpelier, showed up first. Armed with a court order, and accompanied by a couple of stone-faced deputy sheriffs and two elderly genealogists, they scoured the barn for artifacts and documents.

One does not mess with genealogists. Fierce and protective and obsessive.

They found and saved all of the trunks and their contents.

The good news was that the campus property, now reverted to meadows and patches of forest, was gifted to a nature conservancy. Will host native flora and fauna in perpetuity.

Those embossed wood panels covered with protective wards also will do somebody some good. Joe said he heard that they were covering the walls of bedrooms where children never have nightmares and where peace is soaked into the bones of bungalows and penthouse condos. Where people are protected. Where they are happy and loved.

“That night in the barn meant a lot to both of us,” said Sam.

“Got us set on a right path. We owe you.”

The old man shook his head, but looked pleased.

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After dinner, they all retreated back outside to enjoy the night air and the beauty of the cloudless sky. Sam flicked a finger, and a thousand skeets found themselves hovering over some swampy lowlands near a creek miles away.

(With practice, the long-haired Hunter had learned to tap the telekinesis that lingered in his demon-tainted marrow. Limited himself mostly to benign deeds, like picking locks, fine-tuning the temperature of water in motel showers, loosening stuck jar lids, and retrieving the occasional pillow his brother kicked off their shared bed.)

Costello, the ancient Tuxedo cat, was chin deep in his favorite wicker kitty bed, which was lined
with a down-filled pillow and covered in a scrap of wool blanket, worn to butter softness. Even on a warm night, he would burrow underneath to keep his old bones warm.

Malcolm the dog had decided Sam, the dog lover, was his new best friend. Dog and man ran around the farmyard, playing a complex game of tag based on the age-old theme of Predator and Prey, switching roles as suited them, while the adults, including Henry the fat tabby, watched from the sidelines.

Joe had a question, but it was none of his business. Like the rest of Creation, he knew about the boys. Wondered without judgment. Hoped they figured it out and found happiness. No spouses or partners were mentioned, but when he tapped his way into the kitchen with a dessert plate in hand, hoping to score a second scoop of ice cream for his pie, Dana had told him about the matching silver rings. The constant touching. The smiles.

Good enough.

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Dean cleared his throat.

“Don’t want to presume,” he said to Joe and Dana. “What’s the score, I mean, about your eyes.”

“No surprise. Blind. Too old to fix. Hell, have tried everything from gypsy potions to experimental laser treatments at Yale. Ticker’s on the cusp; wouldn’t survive a surgery. Rather be home. Dana here, she ain’t married, no kids. Lost the coin toss with the rest of the family.

She shook her head at the brothers as he talked. Made the sign for love, hands crossed over her chest, and pointed at her granddad.

“Get a nice vacation,” she said. “Working on a Master of Public Administration degree online. Climbing up the ladder into law enforcement management. Don’t want to be the oldest lady Smoky on the force. The hat never did a thing for me.”

Sam and Dean exchanged glances. A decision was made. Most siblings and longtime partners have that mental telepathy thing going, even if they aren’t soul mates.

“We have an idea, actually a gift. Actually, we have a friend. Does good work. We think you’ll like him. Would like to invite him over. Would that be okay?” asked Sam.

Joe wasn’t a birder, but he knew the basics. At first he thought that Dean was talking on his cell phone, but then he heard Dana gasp and felt the air churn against his face. He heard large wings. An eagle? A swan? A heron? The slightest pop of air being displaced.

A gift, Sam had said.

“Hello Dean,” said Castiel.

Hello Sam.”

“Hello Joe.”

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Turned out Angels could heal some old coots, both human and feline.
Joe sat in the sun, whittling a slide whistle from willow wood. He had found the perfect branch near the creek on his daily early morning walk, plus a bouquet of late-blooming wild flowers for the breakfast table. A cheeky blue jay and its mate stole peanuts from the bowl next to his chair. A quartet of noisy great-grandchildren were harvesting the last crop of runner beans and acorn squash from the garden.

Dana was sitting next to him, writing a paper on the Magna Carta’s influence on law enforcement in the British Isles, tapping away at her computer’s keyboard balanced on her knees while a holographic screen floated in front of her. She could watch her nieces and nephews through the transparent page of text as she worked.

She and Sam were friends now, and he had resources to share, leftover from his days at Stanford. He and Dean were coming back after a quick run up to check on the Loup Garou tribe John had met with decades before. Both Hunters were planning to talk cold cases with her and a couple of trusted colleagues from local law enforcement.

Joe told the children to leave a tithe for the wild things. Tonight, he would open the door to the garden and, tucked under the Log Cabin quilt in his rocking chair, watch the raid by moonlight.

Costello stalked a butterfly, but was distracted by Henry’s tail. He pounced, and ran away, engaging his friend in a game of tag. Joe smiled. Malcolm snored at his feet.

When he felt the touch of the Angel’s fingers on his forehead, and the curtain of shadows parted, he cried for the first time since his wife died. Days later, Dana dared to ask how it felt. Did it hurt? Is that why he cried?

“No,” said her grandfather. “I asked Castiel what he did to heal me and old Costello. He said it was his Grace. An Angel’s Soul.”

“Pure love,” said Joe.
Time Stamp: Cecilia and David - 2000-2004

Chapter Summary

Cecilia, the social worker who became a mentor and substitute mother figure for Sam before and during his time at Stanford, finishes her first Supernatural assignment as a Talismen and finds a new love.

Nice woman, She deserves some happiness.

Child abused is mentioned, but does not apply to central characters.

Chapter Notes

There are two kinds of time stamps for Normal. The ones that can stand-alone will be posted pieces in the Normal series. The ones that are about specific characters and events that require some background, such as this one, will be added chapters.

The events in this post happen before and during Chapter 30.

Talismen are the Hunter civilian underground, going back centuries. They adapted the dagger symbol from the Sicarii, a vicious group of terrorists from the time of the Roman occupation of Judea, symbolizing their stealth and fearlessness, but not their cruelty. Not all Talismen choose to acquire the tattoo. Observant Jews, for example, will not do anything to modify their bodies, including tattoos and piercings.

Talismen might include someone as benign as a cook in a diner who makes sure a traveling Hunter gets seconds without charge, a friendly professor who shares archival information, or a loose band of law enforcement officials, acting as eyes and ears for the Hunter community. Or work side-by-side with Hunters. Sometimes they were Men, Women, and Entities of Letters who wanted a more active role in the war against Evil.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bay Area, California 2000-2005

Since Sam’s first visit years before, and with the impetus of Bobby’s affectionate nagging, Cecilia officially had become a member of the Talismen underground. Had the silver dagger discreetly tattooed on her thigh.

When it glowed in the presence of supernatural energy, it felt cold, like the breath of an angry ghost.

During an interview with a foster parent who had some questionable flags in his file, that chill helped her identify him as a nasty supernatural player in the sex trade in the greater San Francisco area.
It was a type of djinn, in this case a demon that used its venom to enthrall children, which were then sold at astronomical prices to the worst of the world’s super-rich.

Cecilia was to have the pleasure of dispatching him with a curved silver blade, forged in the time of Solomon the Wise. It was kept hidden in plain sight on the wall of a kosher delicatessen in the Mission District.

She had picked it up (and a container of lamb’s blood) after being served a meal of roast chicken, a Russian-style potato salad with fresh peas, and homemade cherry strudel, and receiving a kiss on each cheek from the owner, a middle-aged, secular Jew named Brenda who scolded her for her tired-looking eyes while simultaneously thanking her for her service to their cause.

Did she think she was up to the kill, Brenda asked Cecilia in the same tone she might ask her opinion regarding the strudel. Would apple have been tastier? Too much vanilla? Not enough cinnamon?

Cecilia thought of the self-defense drills young Sam Winchester taught her before he and Bobby Singer left the first time and the months of practice at the firing range before Sam returned.

In her living room, she carefully set up a stack of hay bales against a wall that abutted the outside. Worked every night until she reliably could hit the center of a thick, red-and-white foam target with most pointed objects—a pair of scissors, a switchblade, a dart, or a steak knife.

And when Sam came back to Palo Alto and started his undergraduate classes, one of their regular outings for years was his taking the middle-aged social worker to an abandoned industrial building in Richmond, California, which contained acres of commercial wasteland, and teaching her to throw things at a wall, over and over. Shooting, over and over. Sparring. Learning to use a machete. Digging deeper into the Hunter life.

When Brenda asked if she was ready, Cecilia thought of her husband and daughters who she was forced to watch being drained by the vampire nest, minutes before Rufus and Bobby killed the beasts and saved her. At a moment when she did not want to be saved.

Did not want to live and remember.

“’I am good,” said Cecilia to her new friend, calm before her first mission.

”It’s all good.”

Brenda’s brother, a widowed dentist named David, lifted the blade from its brace on the wall and placed in a protective leather scabbard. He handed it to her along with an Aramaic prayer, which he had downloaded for her, translated into English, and laser-written on parchment, which she needed to speak to cleanse the curved blade within 24 hours of driving it into the djinn’s equivalent of a heart.

“I can chauffeur you,” said David.

“You might need a fast getaway car. Back up if the case goes south. An alibi. I’ll pick you up tomorrow night.”

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The dentist had mild brown eyes, reddish hair, a cleft chin, and a sweet smile. Pretty soft hands. Like Cecilia, he was widowed; the difference being his wife’s monster was breast cancer. She had been cursed with the gene that made Ashkenazi Jewish women more susceptible than the general
population.

Also like Cecilia, he had been blessed with a good marriage. Lived alone. Was good at his job.

David was a reform Jew, barely knew enough Hebrew to get through his Bar Mitzvah ceremony and Friday night services, and ate shrimp, pork chops, and cheeseburgers without a thought. Fasted on Yom Kippur. Celebrated Hanukah and Passover with local families. Decorated his office’s lobby with ecumenical abandon. In winter, put up a menorah, a Christmas tree with a Santa and reindeer, a Kwanzaa display, and the artifacts of a dozen belief systems, including a Pride rainbow flag.

(His grandparents had been Orthodox in Poland; his parents observant but not religious. That’s often how it goes in any New World.)

His rabbi had coaxed him into the local Talismen network. Started when he called David and said he needed a traditional minyan–ten men–for a special service. But on a Tuesday night? Sounded urgent. But at his house?

“Don’t ask”, said the rabbi.

“Just come.”

When David arrived, the rabbi met him at the front door, wearing a tallit (prayer shawl) and a yarmulke (skullcap). The dentist did not think he had ever seen his Reform rabbi wear these symbols of their faith outside of temple or religious ceremonies such as weddings.

“You’re a good man, David. I trust you. Do you trust me? I need your help to save a woman. You’ll see some strange things in the next few minutes. I promise you, just do what I tell you, and everything will be all right. Just fine.”

It turned out that the missing 10\textsuperscript{th} man had come down with a sudden case of food poisoning at the very last minute and was house-ridden. Thus the desperation in the rabbi’s plea.

David followed the reb down the basement stairs and into the ancient knotty pine paneled rec room. Which is where he saw a woman tied with old-fashioned hemp rope to a heavy metal chair, which sat over a circle of symbols painted onto the tiled floor. Her arms and legs were handcuffed to the chair. But every place that metal or rope touched her body, even through her clothing, someone had placed thick, folded wads of toweling as buffers.

She also was gagged with a mouth guard, similar to what David used in his dental practice to keep his patients’ jaws open.

David looked to the rabbi for an explanation; the man held a finger to his lips and shook his head.

The woman was surrounded by eight men sitting in folding chairs, the kind you would buy with cheap card tables. Two of the chairs were empty.

David knew some of them: a real estate agent, a high school history teacher and his teenaged son, the man who owned the hardware store near his office, a retired bus driver, a bartender. They all nodded at the dentist, but no one smiled.

He would have said they looked frightened, because he knew that probably was the look on his face as well.

The rabbi motioned David to sit in one of the two remaining empty chairs. There was a piece of
paper on the seat, with an English-language transliteration of a long Hebrew prayer. David recognized the beginning, the blessing that began most of the invocations at the temple and in home-based religious ceremonies.

*Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha`olam...*

Blessed art Thou, the Lord our God, King of the Universe...

The rabbi stood in front of the only empty chair and looked at the woman, gagged and tied down. She was struggling, and David could hear her whimper.

“Leave now,” said the rabbi to the woman.

“Leave now, or we send you back to hell.”

And that is when David saw her eyes turn black.

“Together,” ordered the rabbi, and the men stood as one, David a beat later, and they all began to pray in unison, following the rabbi’s lead, reading together from the crib sheets.

After decades of attending temple services, David knew what to do. The prayer was unfamiliar, but he read the words out loud and chanted along with the rest of the minyan with ease, falling into a familiar rhythm.

Everything was happening too fast, but yes, he trusted his rabbi and the other men in the room.

It was like a dream where the impossible is viewed with acceptance, without surprise or hesitation. Talking with a long-dead relative. Or flying. Or, in this case, exorcising a demon.

While they prayed, the rabbi sprinkled liquid from a silver flask onto the woman’s face. Embossed on the flask was the Cross of Lorraine, which David recognized from a World War II movie about the French Underground. It was a symbol used by partisans to represent Free France and the liberation of their country from Nazi Germany.

The liquid seemed to hiss and steam, and the woman jerked and coughed and cried out. Holy water, David learned, blessed by the Archbishop of San Francisco.

And then a plume of black smoke reeking of sulphur snaked from her mouth and fled down an open drain hole in the basement’s tiled floor and into the abyss. The woman slumped down in the chair. The instant the tail end of the smoke disappeared the men were on their feet, quickly undoing the ropes and handcuffs. Unwound the protective towels from her ankles and wrists.

David immediately assumed his natural role, stepped forward, and very gently removed the mouth guard. He found out from one of the other men that it was in place to protect the woman from having the demon inside her bite off her tongue. For spite.

The woman woke up. One of the men wiped her face with a moist cloth and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. It was her brother, the bartender.

From a side table the rabbi took a child-sized cup with a built-in straw, filled with what looked like orange juice, as well as a handful of small, wrapped chocolate candies, and handed them over to her brother.

As she came to, her brother gave her small sips of the juice. When she had revived enough to eat, he popped the chocolate candies into her mouth, one at a time, for quick energy. She still was too
dazed to process what had happened.

Took about 30 minutes to revive her. Her brother carried her in his arms up the stairs. Before they left, the rabbi strung an ornate Star of David around her neck and chanted a blessing in Hebrew.

The rest of the men said their good-byes and walked up the stairs, except for David, who suddenly discovered his legs were not working very well. He sat down on a folding chair seconds before he would have fallen on the floor, stunned by what had transpired.

“So,” said his rabbi. “Questions?”

A few hours later David had finished a crash course in the Supernatural world and was a new recruit to the temple’s informal Talismen chapter. They worked side-by-side with allies in a network of religious organizations, including the church from which they had received the flask of blessed Holy Water.

Although many Orthodox and traditional branches of modern religions, including Judaism, forbid engaging in anything that might be called “magic,” other religious people see it as their duty to join the battle actively. David’s rabbi had experienced too much not to want to be useful in tangible ways.

David never found out why the woman in the basement was targeted. Saw her in temple from time to time. She looked fine. Always wore the necklace the rabbi had placed on her.

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On the drive to the djinn’s offices, where the creature worked as a respectable real estate broker, Cecilia and David talked. About family and her growing up in Kentucky as a pretty girl who competed in beauty pageants and his having three brothers–all dentists in the Midwest–and his sister Brenda with her iconic deli and noisy sense of humor.

About Cecilia’s noncommittal religious upbringing in a mainstream Baptist family. Went to church most Sundays, but it was more about community than strongly held spiritual beliefs.

They discussed baseball and food and politics. Established they were both suspicious, independent voters who did not trust, on principle, elected officials of any creed, and their shared love for the simpler pleasures of life, like grilled cheese sandwiches and cold American beer and corny television situation comedies.

David parked his black Mazda sedan outside the djinn’s office, where Cecilia had asked to meet in order to follow-up on a made-up discrepancy regarding a report he had filed with her agency.

He sat in the car with the motor running, not listening to a radio talk station muttering in the background.

David triggered a spell that put the surveillance cameras out of commission without alerting the alarm company. Later, investigators would find a wire chewed through by what would appear to be an adventurous rodent of an unidentified species.

It was suspected that the djinn wore coated contact lenses that prevented its eyes from flaring in cameras and mirrors. The glass in the lens of the cameras, windows, mirrors, and anything that might provide a reflection also was treated with a curse, to prevent humans from seeing its true form.

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Cecilia entered the office with her trusty briefcase and a well-worn, over-sized Gump’s shopping bag. Filled, she ruefully admitted when asked by the djinn, with clothing heading to the Goodwill donation site.

Our heroine distracted the creature with a pile of bureaucratic documents she placed before it on its desk. She purposely printed them in small type to warrant a close inspection with reading glasses. The woman stood up and moved behind its desk, ostensibly to view a colorful photograph of a row of striking Painted Lady Victorian mansions.

The monster was bent over the papers, lipreading the fine print. Cecilia chatted lightly about the photo, turned, and with one clean motion, without hesitation, pulled the silver blade (which had been dipped in blood in her kitchen and allowed to air-dry) from the scabbard hidden underneath her jacket and stabbed the creature in the back, into the exact location of its non-heart.

The fatal blow caused it to vanish in a cloud of fine dust, leaving behind its clothes and watch. Cufflinks. And the contact lenses.

The social worker stuffed the clothing, lenses, cufflinks, and watch into the shopping bag, not before pulling out a handheld vacuum to remove most of the dust from the chair, desk, and floor. Removed her shoes, put them in the Gump’s bag, and with some distaste, put on the creature’s wingtips, so only its fresh footprints would remain in the building. CSI personnel would note that the evidence showed the real estate broker left the building and disappeared into a waiting car. Gone forever.

Cecilia then unlocked and blew open, with a blessing Bobby had given to her as a gift on her previous birthday, every file cabinet, wall safe, and secret bookcase. Every folder was in clear view, stuffed with incriminating evidence. She also removed the password protections on the office computer and shielded it from remote interference. Deleting files was not possible. A very useful software tool designed by the legendary Ash, whom she would meet years later. And hug.

Retrieved the papers she brought and ran the vacuum one last time.

Scuffed out her own footprints as she walked out.

Wiped her prints from the computer and the front door knobs. Otherwise, had touched nothing.

The mountain of evidence kept the FBI, CIA, Interpol, and various NGOs focused on sex trafficking busy for years. Put a number of bad humans in jail, for, well, forever, meaning until they were killed by vengeful inmates, particularly the ones with children of their own. And provided a handy list of monsters masquerading as humans, which was distributed to the international Hunting community.

Pretty good for a first mission.

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David took her out to dinner the next night for a quiet celebration, mostly about remembering the victims and talking about future cases. Escorted her to temple the next Friday night, which she found fascinating and not at odds with her vanilla Protestant upbringing, except that mentions of Jesus and salvation were lacking. Then, took her out for Saturday brunch, a Saturday night movie, Sunday brunch. They spent Sunday evening at Cecilia’s condo: grilled cheese sandwiches, old episodes of the Dick Van Dyke show, and some heavy necking.

They both were old school romantics. Waited two more weeks until they sealed their engagement
over lunch at his sister’s deli, toasting each other with bottles of longneck Budweiser beer and
strudel. Brenda snapped photos and cried. The matching rings were simple, at Cecilia's insistence.
Better things to spend money on, even after she found out her sheepish fiancé was well-to-do.

Had a small ceremony as soon as legally possible at The Rose, the lovely Russian café on the
corner of her block. The rabbi officiated. With respect for her late husband, Cecilia wore a simple,
pretty silk suit with a corsage instead of a bouquet. No wedding dress. No veil. And no talk of her
having to convert. From the point of view of David and his slightly unconventional rabbi, other
spiritual traditions tied them together.

Attending were local Talismen, members of David’s temple, David’s family, Cecilia’s coworkers,
and, of course, Sam and Jessica and Bobby. And Rufus, who was delighted to show off his
knowledge of ceremonial Hebrew and flirt with the single women from the congregation.

(After the event with the vampire nest, Cecilia had let the connections with her family back in
Kentucky and her husband's people fade away. Some of them irrationally blamed her for the
murders by that motorcycle gang (the official story). She had a new family now.)

The wedding reception was where Jessica’s suspicions about Sam’s past were fueled. Random
people approached her to ask if she was something called a Talismen. After her third puzzling
encounter, she could see groups of people whispering, and the questions stopped. Something she
needed to ask Sam about, someday.)

The honeymoon on Catalina Island, the first time they did more than kiss and touch, was very very
nice. Healed something important for both of them, because although the circumstances were
different, neither Cecilia nor David ever thought they would love again.

Glad they were wrong.

Chapter End Notes

I happen to be a secular Jew who knows just enough to be dangerous. The portrait of
the rabbi was inspired by a religious leader from my youth, who was expelled from
South Africa in the 1950s for opposing apartheid. He would have been a great Hunter.

In regards to Cecilia and David’s whirlwind courtship and marriage: It must be
something in the air and water in Palo Alto. I personally know two couples, students
and professors at Stanford, who dated very briefly and then married within days after
they first met. And enjoyed decades of marital bliss. Good people.

End Notes

I think almost everyone underestimates young Sam. And Dean, at times.
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