Escaping the Dark Side

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Summary

Monsters used to run when they saw Sam and Dean Winchester. Now Dean is gone and Sam is the one on the run, and there's a lot more than just monsters chasing him.

Notes

This work is going to be undergoing minor edits over the next few days/weeks (depending on how long it takes), but the story itself won't change.

If you see mistakes of any kind in this story, feel free to point them out as I'm always on the lookout for things I missed while proofreading. Thanks!
Chapter 1

The night is silent but for the sound of bare feet on cement and the gasping breaths of an injured man.

Sam Winchester sprints down the street, adrenaline and momentum the only things keeping him from collapsing as he runs from the shadows in his mind. Paired with each breath is a sharp pain in his chest but he continues forward, running to nowhere and from nothing, the idea of stopping never once crossing his mind. Sam hears footsteps behind him and increases his pace, heart racing, chest heaving. He can't let them catch him. He won't be able to get away again. He barely got away this time.

Water assaults his vision, and he wipes his eyes with his free hand, the other busy gripping a rusted metal crutch like a lifeline. Sam dives into an alley to his right as the skies open up, hoping that the sudden onslaught of rain will distract the shadows chasing him. The imposing sounds of feet approach and disappear again, but Sam stays crouched in the alley, shaking like mad and unable to force himself to move.

He eventually pulls himself to his feet, but the energy leaves his body as quickly as it came and Sam's leg buckles, sending him crashing to the ground. The sharp pains in his chest flare up, no longer held at bay by his adrenaline, and Sam's vision spins, dark spots encroaching from all sides. He tries to stand again and cries out in pain as his entire body protests. Shoving his back further into the dirty brick wall of the alley, Sam curls in on himself, trying to shield his numerous injuries from the elements. His mind screams for him to run and he looks down at his torso, trying to distract himself from his runaway thoughts.

His dirty gray t-shirt dampens, a mixture of rain, sweat, and blood pressing the shirt into Sam's skin. When he shifts, the material moves with him, cemented to his wounds, sticky and wet and disgusting. His sweatpants fall awkwardly on his legs, emphasizing the differences. Sam's right leg is much thinner than the left and significantly more angular, and Sam forces himself to look away as his ears ring and his eyes water from the memories that his mismatched legs bring to the surface.

He lost his shoes long ago, escaped with only his shirt, pants, and a single sock shoved onto the strangely smooth right foot, hiding the metal monster beneath. The sole of his left foot is covered in small cuts from the uneven pavement, streams of red running clear in the rain.

And of course, Sam's entire body is covered in layers of dirt and blood, long ago dried but never scrubbed away. All Sam wants is a change of clothes and a shower, but his mind refuses to allow him even that small comfort.

The screams echo, and Sam clamps his hands over his ears, humming softly. He tries to block out the noise but in the process becomes hyper-aware of it.

Because of this, Sam hears the intruder before he sees them. He detects the rain slamming against something plastic instead of the concrete alley and the sounds of heavy footfalls and looks up, eyes finding hints of red through the shadows, partnered with black. The shape is humanoid, but that doesn't mean much to Sam. Anyone could be an enemy. Nobody is a friend. Sam knows better than to trust the figure, years of experience and instruction screaming at him, telling him to run, to fight, to hide. The contradictory orders confuse Sam to the point of hopelessness, and his body remains still as if cemented to the wall behind him.

The sky explodes in light, torn in half by a flash of lightning, and Sam startles as the alley is
suddenly illuminated. He takes in the stranger he can now see, committing as much as he can to memory before the lightning fades and takes with it Sam's sight. The man stands perfectly unmoving, head cocked to one side, as the alley returns to darkness and Sam rapidly sorts through the visual information he was able to collect. The stranger is wearing a red and black suit, made of a mesh-like material in some places and something plasticky in others. His eyes are covered by a red mask that also hides his hair, a cowl that is perfectly smooth but for two small horns protruding from the top. The man looks, at least in Sam's eyes, like the most famous representation of the Devil. And although Sam knows very well that the traditional descriptions are far from the truth, the simple fact that this man appears to be emulating Sam's greatest fear is enough for Sam's mind to regard him as an enemy. And that fear is enough to make Sam climb to his feet, edging slowly away from the stranger in devil's clothing.

"Are you okay?" The devil asks, his voice a low growl that Sam can barely hear over the thunder and rain. Sam nods, praying that the man leaves him alone, praying that this stranger is only a stranger, not an enemy. The devil frowns, stepping forward, and Sam counters with a step back, shivering. His back is to the street, now, leaving him exposed. His heart crashes in his chest at the thought. He wants desperately to be able to turn around, to protect his back, but he can't look away from the devil. Sam is trapped by his own fear, too scared to run but too scared to fight.

Another flare of lighting gives Sam a better look at the devil, and this time Sam sees the dark stubble on his chin, the fresh blood on his cheek. This man has been in a fight, a recent one. Which just makes him more dangerous.

"Listen." The devil says. "You don't want to talk, I get it. I'm going to leave now, okay?" Sam nods, tilting his head in confusion. This man, this devil, isn't going to hurt him? Is going to leave him be? "But you're hurt." The devil continues. "I'm going to leave the number of a friend of mine. If you don't want to go to a hospital, go to her. She can help you under the radar. You don't have to go. You don't even have to take the card. I understand. Just..." the devil trails off, offering Sam a soft smile. "Just think about it. And take care of yourself." The sound of something hitting metal draws Sam's eyes up, and another burst of light from the sky illuminates the devil's figure as he climbs a fire escape up to the roof, disappearing from Sam's sight. Sam waits a few moments, listening for the man's return, then limps over to the wall where he left his crutch in his earlier fear. He crouches down, reaches for the crutch, and pauses.

Pinned to the wall by the rusted metal is the number the devil promised, scrawled on a napkin in the handwriting of a small child. The only thing on the card other than the number is a name. Claire. Sam hesitates, considering his options.

He knows he can't trust the strange man with devil's horns, but he definitely needs medical assistance, and soon. The sharp pains in his chest can only be the result of several broken ribs, dangerous if not treated properly, and Sam's numerous other injuries are made similarly critical by the fact that he has no access to a shelter or medical supplies. This nurse, Claire, could be the only option Sam has for medical treatment. But is he willing to bring anyone else into his life?

With a heavy sigh and a subsequent grimace at the pain it causes, Sam shoves the napkin into the pocket of his tattered sweatpants, grabbing his crutch and standing. He may never call the number—at the moment, he doesn't even have a phone—but for some reason, the thought of someone out there willing to help him is comforting. For the first time in months, a small smile makes its way onto Sam's face, and he slowly heads for the street.

Far above the alley, a figure perches on a rooftop, watching over the injured man as he leaves the alley and turns, heading into the heart of Hell's Kitchen. The Devil stands and smiles to himself, making a mental note to keep track of the strange man with no shoes and a rusted crutch. A cry for
help draws his attention, but the Devil hesitates, focusing his attention back down one last time and waiting as the injured man disappears into an abandoned building.

Only once he's sure of the man's safety does the Devil of Hell's Kitchen finally turn away, confident that he'll be returning to this building in the coming nights.
An ear-piercing scream. An earth-shattering explosion. The heat of a fire, the smell of smoke, the overwhelming stench of blood and sudden, white-hot pain. A laugh, sinister and evil, and a face, perfectly clean, perfectly uninjured. Eyes, black as coal. Another scream, closer this time. Younger. Feminine. Sharp pain in Sam's chest. More screaming.

Sam shoots into a seated position and gasps for breath. His chest heaves but no air reaches his lungs, and Sam grabs at his chest, trapped under the weight of smoke and dust and the ever-present taste of blood.

It takes far too long for his eyes to scan the room, far too long to process his surroundings. He's close to passing out, vision darkening when he finally registers the four concrete walls, dirty and aged but smooth, off-white and gray but without a hint of red, that tells him he isn't there anymore. And then memories flood back, and he opens his mouth to scream, and oxygen rushes into his lungs.

And his hands fall to his sides as he breathes, the air clean of dust and smoke but still dirty. Still salty and red and inescapable.

He stands up with difficulty, one hand on the ground and the other wrapped around his stomach, his mouth twisted into a grimace as he forces his aching body to cooperate. He isn't sure where he is, when he is, but he knows for sure that he isn't safe and he's convinced that they're looking for him. They will never stop looking for him.

Sam relaxes his fist, and a crumpled piece of paper falls from his hand, hitting the floor with a crunch. He bends over to retrieve it, and his head spins, and he's suddenly aware of how thirsty he is. He doesn't remember the last time he had anything to drink or eat for that matter.

Right on cue, his stomach growls, a low, painful groan that reminds Sam of the sounds he produces when everything hurts but he can no longer scream. Flashes of red-orange and yellow erupt, and Sam squeezes his eyes shut, willing the scattered memories away. He has to focus on something else. Anything else.

Sam distracts himself by looking at the room around him, finding exits, vantage points, hidden corners. Familiarity makes Sam feel safer, and as he takes in the uniform corners of the rectangular room, Sam's heart slows and he feels himself relaxing. His eyes return to the crumpled napkin on the floor and he allows himself to remember the previous night, taking care to block out anything that could trigger a flashback and instead focusing on the mysterious man in the devil suit.

A complete stranger found Sam in an alley, dressed in literal rags, and gave him the phone number of a nurse he trusted. Who was that man? And, more importantly, was he human?

Sam knows he needs to call the nurse, regardless of his feelings about the strange man. His ribs aren't likely to set the right way if he doesn't wrap them soon, and Sam has too many other problems to risk sickness or infection. The only problem is, Sam doesn't have a phone or any way to get access to one. He could ask around in the street, of course, but he doesn't want to risk them finding him, and besides, no one would offer their phone to someone who looked like Sam does right now anyway.

A siren wails and Sam flinches, the sound resembling the cries of those he wasn't able to save. Forced into a sudden awareness of the sounds in the area, Sam becomes overwhelmed by city
noise. He hears screams, some angry and some scared. He catches crashing and breaking and shattering glass, and so many other sounds that he can't sort through them all. Sam crouches down, pulling his knees to his chest and clamping his hands over his ears. Everything is so loud. How didn't he notice it before?

As Sam's ears ring, his other senses pick up as well. He can taste the plaque on his teeth, smell the odors of perfumes worn on the street outside long ago. He can feel each piece of gravel blended into the concrete beneath his bare foot, and the sticky sweat and blood stuck to his ears. Sam curls in on himself, willing the excessive stimulus to leave him be.

All at once, the smells and sounds and tastes disappear, gone with the same rapidity as they came. Sam shifts, uncurling tentatively. He's almost straightened to his full height before he risks opening his eyes, and when he does, he wishes he hadn't.

The entire world has turned a brilliant shade of yellow, everything in sight bathed in a color that sends shivers down Sam's spine. He blinks and the color changes. Repeated blinking causes the walls to go yellow, gray, yellow, gray, until Sam is dizzy once again, holding his head. When he can focus again, he's thankful that the concrete room has returned to the grayscale it's meant to be. Sam tastes something salty and touches his lip, heart skipping a beat as he stares at his fingers, which are now shiny and red with fresh blood.

"No," Sam whispers, old memories coming to the surface of a pretty girl and an evil laugh and blood, so much blood. He swore never to touch a drop again but they insisted, they forced it on him, they injected him with needles full of dark red and they laughed when his veins filled with fire and he screamed and fought and cried. And they cheered when he broke the bonds the first time and jeered when he stumbled and fell, and when the cuts on his back started healing a little bit too fast they only made them longer. He swore to be better, to turn his life around. And they took that from him. They turned him back into the monster he tried so hard to escape.

Sam knows they made him like this, made the world so loud and yellow, but he doesn't remember exactly how. He remembers the needles, the blood, the pain, but he doesn't remember when they took him there. He doesn't remember what happened before.

He doesn't remember losing his brother, but he must have because Dean never tried to rescue him.

Sam doesn't remember his brother's death, or disappearance, or whatever happened to make Dean not save Sam.

What's wrong with Sam? Why can't he remember? His mind is a slate, wiped clean, but pieces of memories still cling on, trying to help but only lending disorienting flashes of fire and pain and yellow eyes.

The more he thinks about it, the more obvious the blank spots become. Sam can't figure out what exactly it is he's missing, but every hint of the hidden memories sends his heart burrowing deeper into his stomach. Whatever Sam can't remember, it's bad. Very bad.

Maybe Sam's missing memories are the reason they took him. Maybe they're the reason his right leg is made of metal.

A muffled scream draws Sam's attention to the street and every muscle in his body tenses as he listens.

"...quiet, or I'll kill ya." A man says in a harsh tone, his voice crystal clear to Sam, the anger in his tone apparent. And the alcohol. Sam is pretty sure he could smell the beer on the guy's breath from
a block away. But Sam also detects flowery perfume he's rather certain doesn't belong to the guy. Which means that threat wasn't aimed at Sam, it was aimed at a woman. A woman who is in a lot of trouble.

Without a second thought, Sam runs for the door, the sharp pains in his chest as ignored as the rusted cane and the crumpled paper lying on the concrete floor.
The second Sam steps outside, he's assaulted by a blast of cold air. It's late at night, freezing and dark and, luckily for Sam, the exact opposite of the conditions in his disjointed memories. While warmth traps Sam in his mind, the cold air wakes him up, heightens his senses. For the first time since his escape, Sam feels like himself again.

He looks around, taking in the surroundings he was too distracted, too scared, to observe the night before. The building where he chose to spend the night is one of four on this block, two on each side of the road. They're uniform, warehouses, made of concrete rooms stacked on top of each other, identical in every way. Sam looks for street signs, businesses, anything that might tell him where he is, but he comes up empty, the only clue, two street signs marking an intersection, too far away to read in the darkness. Sam is beginning to head in that direction when he hears scuffling and remembers why he entered the street in the first place.

"Help!" A woman's voice echoes off of the concrete buildings that surround Sam, her words slurred but her tone urgent. Sam follows the sound to the alley where he met the man with devil's horns the night before. Another scream draws Sam's eyes to his right, where he spots a man forcing a woman harshly against the brick wall.

"Shut up, you bitch!" The same man that Sam heard before yells. His words are just as slurred as hers, but he seems more aware, or maybe only angrier. The woman tries to shove the man away, but he grabs her wrists, pinning her to the wall. Sam walks towards the duo slowly, hands forming into fists purely out of instinct.

"Hel-" The woman tries to yell again, but the man slaps her, cutting off the cry. Sam stalks forward, grabbing the man's arm and pulling him roughly away from the woman.

To Sam's surprise, the man goes flying, slamming into the opposite wall of the alley with enough force to rattle the windows. When he falls, hitting the ground with a sickening thump, pieces of concrete rain down with him, leaving an indentation in the wall of the building. Sam turns back to the woman to see her gaping at him, eyes wide, expressions of fear and relief warring on her face. Sam quickly lowers his head, tugging at his lip with his teeth. He can't risk her recognizing him, can't risk her exposing him to them, but he also can't just leave her here with his man. Sam blinks, noticing a black scarf crumpled on the ground near his feet.

"Oh, you ass!" The drunk man yells from behind Sam. With no time to think, Sam acts on instinct, bending down and grabbing the scarf, then tying it around his face so that it covers his mouth and nose. He spins around, barely dodging the man's fist as it flies toward his face and grabbing his arm. Sam turns to the woman, opening his mouth to tell her to leave, to run away, but the man twists out of his grip, sending another fist toward Sam's stomach that Sam doesn't have time to avoid. The blow makes Sam stumble, sending pain shooting through his chest, and the man laughs. "Fuck off, man." He slurs, stalking closer. Black dots invade Sam's vision, and he tilts his head, trying to locate the man through the sudden darkness. Another punch comes out of nowhere, connecting with Sam's upper chest. Sam hears something crack and tastes something warm and metallic. His vision spins, and he blinks, watching as the world returns to the yellow hue he encountered before.

And then Sam realizes that the other two people in the alley aren't yellow. Instead, they're glowing white.

The man attacks again, and Sam evades the punch with ease, every attempted assault clear as day.
now that the man's form is illuminated. Sam is easily able to grab the man, holding him still and turning to the woman.

"Run," Sam growls, voice low and scratchy and probably terrifying. "Get somewhere safe." The woman doesn't need to be told twice, turning and disappearing into the street. Sam releases the man and punches him in the jaw, and the man falls like a load of bricks.

Sam crouches down beside the man, searching his pockets and pulling out his cell phone. He dials 911, putting the phone against his ear.

"911, what's your emergency?" A woman asks on the other line.

"I've got a drunk guy in an alley, he was trying to assault a girl," Sam says in the same low growl from before, figuring that even if he could manage to use his actual voice, it doesn't need to be on a recording. Sam looks around and quickly discovers that in his yellow-toned world, he can make out the words on the once-indecipherable street sign down the block with startling clarity. "An alley near the intersection of 11th and 50th."

"Hell's Kitchen," The woman says, sounding surprised. "Wait, are you Daredevil?" Sam hesitates, gnawing on the inside of his cheek. He vaguely recognizes the name, although he doesn't know precisely why. But it isn't difficult for Sam to figure out that Daredevil is most likely the red-suited man he encountered last night, at least if the devil's horns were anything to go by.

"No," Sam says after a minute, "I'm someone else. Someone new."

"Oh," The woman says, her tone a mixture of surprise and disappointment. Apparently, this Daredevil is quite popular. "Um, police are headed your way. I'm assuming you won't be around to meet them?"

"No," Sam says, a small smile finding its way to his face. "Thank you."

"No problem," The woman replies. "Good luck, Mr. Vigilante."

Vigilante? Sam isn't a vigilante. Vigilantes are one step down from heroes, people who spend their nights saving others. Protecting them. Sam has heard about vigilantes before. Spider-Man is one that comes to mind, and he's pretty sure Daredevil also fits the criteria. But Sam... Sam doesn't. Sam isn't a trustworthy person. He could never be a vigilante. At best, he'd never become a hero.

Sam isn't sure why his heart pains at the thought.

"You did pretty well," A deep voice rings out from behind Sam, and Sam smiles faintly.

"Daredevil," He says, turning his head to see the man in question leaning against the far wall of the alley. The vigilante is inches from the hole in the wall Sam accidentally created earlier, and there's a small pile of dust and rocks at his feet.

"Ah, so he speaks," Daredevil says with an interestingly warm smile. "Last night you were using a crutch to walk and cowering from the rain in an alley. Tonight you're wearing a mask and stopping potential rapists. That's quite the evolution. Who exactly are you?"

"I'm just a guy," Sam replies, climbing to his feet. His head spins and his chest aches, but he ignores the pain, focusing his attention on Daredevil. The vigilante seems honest enough, but Sam doesn't think he's capable of trusting anyone right now, even a hero.
"A guy who can throw a man his size across an alley and into a wall hard enough to break concrete." Daredevil points out. "Last time I checked, that wasn't 'just a guy.'"

"I'm just trying to help," Sam says honestly.

"Aren't we all." Daredevil retorts. "Do you at least have a name?"

"I'm not telling you my name," Sam says a little bit too quickly. Daredevil angles his head to the side, a move that Sam recognizes as confusion. Cas used to do that all the time.

Where is Cas, anyway?

"Of course not." Daredevil says. "You're wearing a mask. People in masks don't tend to want their identities to be known. I meant a code name. An alias. Like Captain America, or Hawkeye."

"Or Daredevil?" Sam asks, and Daredevil nods, smiling.

"Exactly." He says.

Sam frowns, considering. He could keep doing this. He could wear a mask, save people, stop bad guys. No one would ever have to know it was him. Sam Winchester is considered dead to most of the world, it would be easy to keep it that way. Isn't that how he's spent most of his life, anyway? Stopping bad guys? The only difference is he'd be stopping real people, not monsters.

He wouldn't have to kill.

This thought gives Sam pause, and he looks up at Daredevil, who is still watching him with a tilted head. Sam has always hated having to kill the monsters he fights, but he's also known it was necessary. Monsters can't be arrested or jailed. They can't learn from their mistakes. But humans are different. Humans can be caught, held, saved. Maybe being a vigilante is the hunting alternative Sam has been looking for his entire life.

Except that the powers Sam has are new. He isn't trained, and he unquestionably isn't in control of his new abilities, as evidenced by the broken wall Daredevil is leaning on. What if he accidentally hurts someone? A small part of Sam's brain asks a different question: What if the blood that gave him these powers works the same way it used to?

What if he goes darkside because he uses them too much?

Sharp pain in Sam's side breaks his train of thought, and Sam looks down, eyes widening in horror. His t-shirt is soaked, bright red even in his altered yellow vision. And to make matters worse, the red spot is steadily growing. How did Sam not realize he was bleeding? Adrenaline? Ignorance? Fear?

"What's wrong?" Daredevil asks. Sam briefly wonders why the hero doesn't seem to notice the blood staining Sam's clothes, then remembers that Daredevil doesn't have Sam's newfound night vision and probably can't see much of anything right now.

"That almost rapist re-broke one of my ribs, I think," Sam explains. "I also think it punctured my chest. Or I might have opened an old wound. Or even acquired a new one. Who knows?" He's rambling, trying to be funny, channeling his inner smart-ass because he's scared. Just like Dean.

The alley is moving now, swaying back and forth. Sam tries to grab it and hold it still, but his fingers just grasp air. The alley tilts on its side, and a hard thump alerts Sam to the fact that something just fell. It takes over a minute for Sam to realize that that something was him.
"Claire," Daredevil says into a phone, sounding somewhat panicked as he crouches down beside Sam. "I've got a friend here, he's injured and losing blood fast. Can I bring him to your place?" Sam hears a faint sigh through the phone, but the following reply is drowned out by rapidly approaching sirens. Daredevil curses, dropping his phone into a hidden pocket and stooping over. He picks Sam up bridal style and straightens, shifting until Sam is somewhat balanced. "Hang on tight, buddy." Daredevil says, heading for the fire escape. "This is going to be a bumpy ride."

Sam feels himself being jostled roughly, every small movement sending another wave of pain through his body. He feels the wind on his face as Daredevil runs, fast but not superhumanly so. Sam feels sharp pains in his chest, then numbness in his fingers and toes. He feels scared, then hurt, then exhausted.

And then Sam's eyes slip closed, and he feels nothing at all.
Chapter 4

Sam wakes to an overwhelming feeling of exhaustion, to the point where he genuinely wonders if he was ever actually asleep. Every single part of his body aches, from his head to his toes. Even his nose throbs. With Sam's luck, it's probably broken. Along with his ribs. After a short examination of his body in which he determines that pretty much everything is either bruised or broken, Sam turns his senses outward. He doesn't even try to open his eyes, his eyelids like weights pressing on his corneas, blackout curtains far too heavy for Sam to lift.

Instead, he puts his energy into interpreting his other four senses, using them to try to build a picture of the world around him.

Sam tastes dust, drywall, and blood. He feels rough fabric scratching his back and his left side, and something softer propping up his head and his left leg. He hears footsteps, a door creaking, and the rustling of a plastic bag. He smells vegetables and spices intertwined with salt and mold. He hears a sigh, a soft hum, and a fridge opening and closing. The humming is high, distinctly feminine, and Sam faintly remembers Daredevil calling his nurse friend from the alley. More likely than not, this is her. Sam strains to picture the crumpled napkin he left in the abandoned warehouse and the name scribbled on it. Claire, he recalls. The nurse's name is Claire.

Sam's neck twinges from the awkward position he's found himself in—as usual, he's too large for the couch he's lying on—and he shifts, trying to get more comfortable. He immediately regrets the decision as the dull aches amplify, white-hot pain rushing through his body and quickly drowning out the softer mild soreness of before. A pained sound escapes Sam's lips before he can choke it back and the melodic humming coming from the kitchen stops abruptly. Sam stills himself immediately, understanding that the nurse isn't likely to hurt him but falling victim nonetheless to the decades of pain and betrayal that dictate his emotions. Sam can't trust anyone, not anymore. Not after everything he's been through.

It's then that Sam realizes that the black scarf he obtained in the alley is no longer tied around his head, no longer obscuring his mouth and nose from view. Which means that Claire saw his face. Which means if she's one of them, she already knows exactly who Sam is.

This revelation is what finally gives Sam the strength to open his eyes, and he does so immediately, scanning the room rapidly. Sam catalogs every door and window in what appears to be the living room of a somewhat disorganized apartment, creating several escape plans in seconds—none of which he'd be able to put into motion without casualties or outside help. During this frenzied scan, Sam notes that the world is still tinted yellow, but he sets that aside, deeming it the least important of his current problems. He also notes the light filtering through the window, illuminating some of the dust in the air. It was dark out when Sam left the warehouse, but he doesn't know exactly what time it was. He could have been out for an hour or ten.

"He's awake!" Claire informs someone else as she approaches the couch. She has dark hair and tan skin, and her eyes are somehow sharp and soft at the same time. She looks like someone who has seen too much, been hardened by the realities of life, but who tries to be kind anyway, to make a difference. Sam remembers when he looked like that. He remembers when Dean looked like that.

Claire's words draw the attention of another person, and heavy footsteps enter the room from behind Sam. Sam finds himself tensing, fear washing over him as flashes of dark streets and blood and dirty concrete rooms infiltrate his mind.
"Hey, stranger." Daredevil's now-familiar growl carries through the room, and Sam relaxes, looking to his right as the man in question circles the couch. Daredevil continues past Claire, leaning fully suited and masked in the doorway to the kitchen. Sam is roughly 60 percent sure that Daredevil is one of the good guys, which is significantly more confident than he is about pretty much anything else right now. And if Claire were one of them, she wouldn't have let Daredevil hang around.

"Daredevil," Sam says softly, digging his elbows into the couch in an attempt to sit up. His ribs protest, as does Claire, who quickly puts her hands on his chest and pushes Sam back down onto the couch.

"You have several fractured ribs, Sam. Daredevil told me you thought one broke the skin. I don't think any did, but you were definitely punctured by something." Claire nods to Sam's torso, and he looks down to see ace bandages wrapped all the way around his chest, covering a square-ish bulge near his stomach, most likely a bandage. "You're fortunate." Claire continues. "You could have died from blood loss if our mutual friend here wasn't O neg." Sam turns to Daredevil in surprise and the vigilante smirks, nodding.

"What else?" Sam asks, not sure if the question makes sense but unwilling to go into specifics, lest he accidentally provoke another wave of memories. Luckily, Claire appears to understand.

"Well, you're covered in scars, which I'm sure you already knew," Claire says. "And you're going to have some new ones, courtesy of whatever stabbed you in the chest in that alley. Your most recent injuries are mostly bruises, other than those ribs, but some of the slightly older stuff may give you some trouble."

"Like what?" Sam asks, looking down at his own body.

"The sole of your left foot was pretty torn up, which isn't surprising seeing as you were running around barefoot. Although it does look like most of the damage is from a while ago, considering the level of healing." The comment is said so casually that Sam almost misses it, and he doesn't have time to process before Claire continues. "Same goes for the split lip and busted knuckles."

"Hmm?" Sam shakes his head in disbelief. He knew that he healed faster than average—they enjoyed cutting his arms to see how long he bled—but Sam just hurt his knuckles last night, punching that drunk man. That certainly doesn't classify as an old injury. "How long ago do you think I got those injuries?"

"I don't know, maybe a week?" Claire says, her tone suggesting that she's starting to reconsider. "They look pretty serious, but they've healed relatively well."

"I got most of them two nights ago," Sam admits. "I was in a fight, and I ran away. Tore my lip in the fight, and I was forced to run barefoot, mostly on the sidewalk. I'm pretty sure I split my knuckles last night fighting that drunk guy. That certainly doesn't classify as an old injury. "How long ago do you think I got those injuries?"

"Great, another one," Claire says exasperatedly, throwing up her hands.

"Another what?" Daredevil asks. While Claire sounds genuinely annoyed, Daredevil just sounds amused.

"Another guy with superpowers—healing, in this case—fighting bad guys in the streets," Claire says. "Why didn't you tell me he had powers?"
"All I knew about was the strength, and I told you about that." Daredevil defends himself, sounding somewhat flustered.

"You didn't know about the healing, which I get, but you could have at least warned me about the yellow eyes," Claire complains, frowning. After a second, her face reddens slightly, and Sam quirks an eyebrow. Why would that statement embarrass her? For his part, Daredevil doesn't seem affected. He just shrugs, cocking his head to one side.

"Couldn't see much in the alley," Daredevil says, "and then his eyes were closed. Either way, I was kind of distracted." Sam repeats the exchange in his mind, then his eyes go wide.

"Wait, did you say yellow eyes?" He asks.

"Yeah. Your eyes. They're yellow." Claire states matter-of-factly. "You didn't know?"

"I'm beginning to realize that there's a lot I don't know." Sam says, shaking his head. "Of all the horrible things for me to inherit, it had to be the eyes."

"Inherit?" Daredevil asks curiously.

"I, uh, I'm kinda new to the whole superpowers thing," Sam explains awkwardly. "When you found me in that alley the other night, I was terrified, right? That's because I had literally just escaped from the ones who gave me these abilities." Just that simple admission is enough for the feeble barriers in Sam's mind to snap, and he squeezes his eyes shut as he's assaulted by memories.


"Hey, Sam, stay with me," Claire says urgently, her hands on Sam's shoulder. Sam jerks away harshly, shoving his spine into the couch, trying to disappear, eyes wide and body shaking.

"I can't," Sam stutters, grabbing at his hair, his shirt, trying to get a solid grip on something, anything. "Can't explain."

"I get it. We get it." Claire says calmly, her voice soothing. It's familiar, but in a good way, and Sam relaxes slightly. Sometimes they were calm, but none of them were ever soothing. "You don't have to say anything, okay?" Sam nods hesitantly, looking up at Daredevil.

"Why did you come back last night?" Sam asks, trying to change the subject. Daredevil smiles sympathetically, indulging Sam.

"You were injured. I gave you Claire's number, then realized you probably didn't have a phone." Daredevil explains. "I wanted to make sure you were okay." Sam nods, not entirely believing the explanation but accepting it nonetheless. No one ever cares that much about Sam, but he's beginning to think that Daredevil just generally cares about everyone. Sam turns back to Claire, who is wearing a smile similar to Daredevil's. Sympathetic.

"Daredevil, do you mind grabbing some clean clothes for Sam?" Claire asks. The vigilante disappears into the kitchen, and Sam frowns. He doesn't want to accept, undeserving of Claire's sympathy, her kindness. Sam doesn't know exactly what they did to him, but he's pretty sure it
wasn't anything good. He's probably been turned into something even worse than he already was, into them. He already knows he's gained their eyes.

"Thank you," Sam says, unable to find the words to refuse. He hears the wariness in his own voice, the hesitation. Claire is offering her kindness to Sam, but he's still scared. She could be playing nice, trying to make him trust her so that her betrayal hurts even more severely later. She wouldn't be the first.

"Of course," Claire replies, sounding genuine as far as Sam can tell. Daredevil returns with a clean black t-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts and Sam frowns, looking down at his arms and leg.

"Scars," Sam says awkwardly, unable to enunciate his fears more than that. Instead, he holds out his arms, showing the nurse and the vigilante the jagged lines that cover them. Some of the scars are old, faded with time, but others are new, fresh. And some Sam doesn't even remember getting, a thought that terrifies him.

Claire nods, shooting Daredevil a look and wordlessly waving him away. The vigilante disappears into the kitchen again, returning about a minute later with a hoodie and a pair of sweatpants, similar to the ones Sam is wearing but clean. Gray, instead of red. More memories rise to the surface, and Sam squeezes his eyes shut again, willing them away.

"Sam, can you tell me what happened to your leg?" Claire asks, trying to distract Sam from his mind. "That can't have been that recent, right?" Sam nods, agreeing with her statement. While he was with them, he was missing a leg. Whatever happened to it happened before them. The only problem is, he can't remember what happened before them.

"I don't know," Sam admits. "I don't remember."

"That's okay, Sam," Claire says, sounding like she really means it. It's not okay, though. Sam needs to remember, he has to. He has to figure out what happened to him. How he ended up with them.

He has to figure out what they did to him.

"Say, I've got a shower with a seat in it." Claire abruptly changes the subject. "Want to give it a try? I'm sure you want to get cleaned up." Sam nods, trying to sit up only for Claire to push him down again. "There's one condition." She says. "You have to take some painkillers first." Sam nods again, unfazed. Dean would make similar deals with him, and he would make them with Dean. It's the most familiar thing Claire has said, and the comfort of the routine makes Sam's muscles relax slightly.

He takes the pills Claire gives him without hesitation, swallowing them dry and immediately pushing himself up into a seated position. Claire chuckles, shaking her head, but she helps Sam to his feet, and the two carefully walk—or limp, in Sam's case—toward the bathroom. Sam is reminded then that he left his crutch in the abandoned warehouse when he departed to help the woman. He'll have to head back there to get it.

Sam and Claire are about halfway to the bathroom when two thoughts in Sam's mind finally connect, and he realizes something he should have noticed long before. Claire has been referring to Sam by name this entire time, which would be fine except for one small detail.

Sam never told Claire his name.
Chapter 5

Sam stops in his tracks, pulling Claire to a stop as well. Claire shoots Sam a concerned look, but he ignores it, head spinning. There was always a chance, of course, that Daredevil was one of them. That both of them were. But Sam wanted so much to believe that he had escaped. That he had found someone who was actually kind. Actually safe.

He should have known better.

"Sam," Claire asks, "what's wrong?" *Sam*, his mind echoes, sneering at him, ridiculing him for not noticing sooner. Claire knows Sam's name, there's no doubt about that. Which means she also knows his identity.

He should have figured it out sooner.

What gives Sam pause, though, is Claire's tone. She sounds genuinely concerned, genuinely worried. She has this entire time. Demons are never concerned. They aren't even capable of it. But Claire obviously is.

There is, though, the possibility that Claire actually recognizes Sam as *Sam Winchester*. Not the demon hunter, not the boy with the demon blood, but Sam Winchester, one-half of the infamous murderous duo from years ago. That alternative isn't exactly great, either, but it's infinitely preferable. Sam can handle the police. He can't handle the demons. Considering that Sam is in a somewhat shabby apartment and not the room with the blood-splattered walls, he's willing to bet that the police will be the ones to show up at the door, not the demons. Regardless, it takes Sam a minute to get his legs moving again, to get his mouth moving.

"Nothing. Sorry." He finds himself saying, mind switching into overdrive as Claire continues forward, pulling Sam back on their track to the bathroom. As they walk, Sam finds himself repeating the same thing over and over, trying to understand. Claire knows who Sam is. But she isn't one of them. She can't be one of them. If she were, Sam would have woken up in the room that haunts his nightmares, not here, not on her *couch*. Certainly not with Daredevil waiting in the next room. But if Claire isn't one of them, isn't a demon, why was she so quickly able to recognize Sam? Even if she only knows him as the dead and alive again serial killer, Claire shouldn't have been able to identify Sam so quickly.

Sam decides that his best course of action is to take advantage of the nurse's kindness before he asks any questions. He's in desperate need of a shower and a change of clothes, so if she's offering them, he has to accept. Who knows when he'll get another chance.

"Here we are," Claire says, pulling Sam from his thoughts. They're inside the bathroom now, cold tiles pressing against the exposed skin on Sam's bandaged left foot. He shivers involuntarily as older, slightly less volatile memories come to the surface. Sam finds his face growing red as he realizes that he's almost as uncomfortable in the cold as in the heat.

"Thanks," Sam says after a minute, finally registering that Claire was expecting a verbal response. The nurse smiles, pointing out the shampoo and the towels before disappearing, giving Sam the privacy he needed but was too scared to ask for. Sam is quick to lock the door, body moving in autopilot as he goes through the motions, stripping down, tossing the bloody shirt and ratty sweatpants in the trash, and turning on the shower.

Before he gets in, however, Sam finds himself staring into the mirror. His chest and upper arms are
covered with scars. He knows the stories behind many of them—the long, jagged scars running from wrist to elbow on both arms, the bullet wound in his stomach, the claw marks from various incidents over the years—but there are new scars all over his body that he doesn't know the origins of. The lines on his wrists, straight as a razor. The cluster of pinpricks centered over his heart. And, as Sam looks down at his own body, the angular metal leg that protrudes from the scarred remains of his thigh. Sam has no idea what happened to his leg, when he lost it, or who amputated it. But he knows someone must have because the jagged scars are clean, straight enough to have been done by a practiced hand.

Dark memories of dust and fire and blood invade Sam's mind, and he looks back up at the mirror, staring into his own eyes.

The yellow eyes Claire mentioned are nowhere to be seen. Instead, Sam sees pure white, shaded yellow, accentuated by two dark pupils. To Sam, his eyes appear iris-less, black and white and terrible. He doesn't have to see the swirling yellow irises to picture them, to imagine the eyes of the demon that killed his mother, his father, his girlfriend, so long ago, or the eyes of the demon who haunts his dreams now, the demon who gave him these strange abilities he doesn't know how to control. Sam knows that Azazel is dead, that he isn't the one responsible, but those yellow eyes have hung over him for so long that in Sam's mind, all yellow-eyed demons are one and the same.

After a minute, Sam blinks, and his vision quickly returns to normal. As the yellow filter disappears, returning the bathroom wall to a pleasant shade of blue, Sam massages his forehead, trying to keep his rapidly forming headache at bay. With a sigh, he pinches the bridge of his nose, stepping into the shower.

The water is warm but not hot, an almost unfamiliar pressure against Sam's back. He can't remember the last time he had a shower, but that isn't surprising seeing as Sam is having trouble remembering much of anything. That stray thought reminds Sam that he doesn't have any idea what day it is, or even what month. His scattered memory says 2017, shows him a newspaper article that screams demons. The date is early October 2017. That's the last clear memory Sam has. A newspaper headline. At least the weather lines up. Cold, rainy weather makes sense for fall in New York City.

And that's another thing. The 911 operator Sam spoke to last night said he was in Hell's Kitchen. Sam knows that Hell's Kitchen is in New York City, and that matches up with the fact that Daredevil is here since Sam remembers that Daredevil operates in Hell's Kitchen. But it doesn't explain precisely how Sam got to Hell's Kitchen in the first place. His last memory is in the bunker, reading an article, finding a case. But Sam is pretty sure that the paper was a local one. Which means the demons were in Lebanon.

How could Sam possibly have gotten from Kansas to New York?

And what happened along the way?

When Sam leaves the bathroom fifteen minutes later clean, changed into the new clothes Daredevil brought, and slightly more awake than before, he finds Claire sitting at the small table in the kitchen, eating Chinese takeout. Sam is either unable or unwilling to speak up, scared of what will happen if he angers her. Terrified that she'll be a monster. So he waits. Eventually, Claire looks up and smiles, nodding to the empty chair across from her. Sam sits down hesitantly, and Claire pushes a box of takeout toward him. He looks down at it, registering that it appears to be some type of chicken. Just the image of the food—despite not being particularly impressive—is enough to make Sam's stomach growl.
"Where did Daredevil go?" Sam finds himself asking as he takes his first tentative bite. The chicken is good, tangy but not overwhelming. Sam's stomach growls again, louder this time, and Claire's smile widens.

"He had to get to work." She explains. "Even vigilantes have day jobs."

"Do you?" Sam asks curiously, figuring that if Claire is willing to talk about her mundane life, there's no way she could be a demon. Most demons don't care enough to make up a backstory, and they certainly don't care enough to learn about their vessels.

"I did," Claire says. "Used to work at the hospital. I quit after my friend was killed by ninjas." Sam raises an eyebrow, but Claire shakes her head sharply, taking a long drink to convey that she doesn't plan to clarify any further.

"What time is it?" Sam asks, changing the subject. Claire shrugs, pointing over her shoulder. Sam sees a clock on the oven across the kitchen, and his eyes widen. "10:45." He says, surprised. "I was out for that long?"

"Daredevil brought you here about nine hours ago," Claire says. "You were out cold, but I don't think you have a concussion, just blood loss. I kinda figured you needed the sleep." Sam doesn't reply, but he also doesn't disagree. If he hasn't been eating and he hasn't been showering, it's not really a stretch to guess that he hasn't been doing much sleeping, either. Not that he gets enough sleep on a good day.

"So, uh, why are you helping me?" Sam asks awkwardly. His voice cracks halfway through, and Claire nods to the water glass sitting near the takeout bag. Sam grabs it and takes a sip, and Claire smiles again, although this time it doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"Daredevil said you were hurt. I'm a nurse." Claire says, and Sam raises an eyebrow.

"And you just let him bring a stranger into your apartment like this?" He asks curiously. Claire's face reddens, and she bites her lip lightly.

"Daredevil trusts you." She explains. "Anyone Daredevil trusts is someone I know I can trust."

"He doesn't trust me, though." Sam protests. "He just met me two days ago. He couldn't possibly trust me."

"Okay, he doesn't actually trust anyone, not really." Claire amends. "But if he brought you here—hell, if he left you here alone with me—he either thinks more highly of my fighting skills than I thought or he at least trusts that you won't try to kill me."

"And do you?" Sam questions. When Claire gives him a funny look, he explains further. "Do you trust me not to kill you?"

"You haven't tried yet, have you?" Claire points out. "Besides, Daredevil told me that you got hurt stopping an attempted rape. That makes you trustworthy in my book, Sam."

"Sam," Sam repeats, and Claire bites her lip again. "How do you know my name? I'm pretty sure I never told you."

"It's kind of hard not to if I'm honest," Claire admits. "You're Public Enemy Number 1, after all. It's not like your face is plastered everywhere or anything." The way she says it is so casual, so nonchalant, that it doesn't even register for a minute. But when it does, the words jump out at Sam, burning into his mind. Public Enemy Number 1. Sam is the single most wanted person in the entire
country, and he had no idea. What could he possibly have done to earn that title?

"I am?" Sam asks, fear rising in his stomach. Claire gives Sam another funny look, and he swallows hard, uncomfortably aware of the lump forming in his throat. "I, uh, I'm having some trouble with my memory at the moment." Claire's eyes widen, and she leans forward, staring into Sam's eyes.

"Do you have a history of concussions?" She asks. While moments ago Claire's voice was calm and soothing, like a nurse should be, it has abruptly switched to a tone more reminiscent of an interrogator. Forward. Urgent.

"No," Sam says, biting the inside of his cheek. "Well, uh, yes, but I don't think it's like that." He scans his memory, deliberately prodding at the hidden memories for the first time. Not the nightmares, not the room with the red walls, but the memories before that. The memories of heat and dust and blood. And he realizes that, no matter how hard he tries, the wall holding those memories back is one he can't break. "I think I'm sort of, um, unwillingly blocking them, if that makes sense." Sam tries to explain. "I don't actually know what day it is, to be honest. Or month."

"What's the last thing you remember?" Claire asks, eyebrows furrowing as she scrutinizes Sam.

"A newspaper article," Sam says honestly. Claire is probably the only person Sam has access to right now who can figure out what's wrong with him. Well, with his memory, at least. Sam brings forward his last clear memory, straining to recognize the date stamped at the top of the paper.

"October 2, 2017." He says confidently. To his surprise, Claire's eyes widen, and her face pales as she shakes her head.

"You really don't know, do you." She says, shaking her head twice more before resting it on her palms.

"Know what?" Sam asks, stomach twisting as his throat closes up. What happened to him? What did he do?

Why can't he remember?

"October 5, 2017," Claire says. "There was a bomb, a massive bomb, planted in the kitchen of a Biggerson's in Lebanon, Kansas. When it detonated, it flattened over half of the city." Sam hears a loud explosion in the back of his mind, feels the vibrations, tastes the dust. The blood. "Around 50 people died, another 100 were injured." Claire continues. "It pretty much wiped the town off the map." Several screams echo in Sam's mind, and he winces, painfully aware that his voice is among them. These are the voices of the ones he couldn't save. An entire town, destroyed. "Dean Winchester was caught trying to escape the scene." Sam looks up at this, surprised to hear his brother's name. Claire nods, detecting Sam's disbelief. "He's been in prison ever since, awaiting trial. The FBI is pretty sure he's the one who set the bomb, seeing as he's the only one who was running away before it went off." Claire pauses, shooting Sam a pointed look. "Actually, they think both of you did it. Of course, you haven't been seen since before the bombing."

"Wait, how long ago was that?" Sam asks. Claire is talking like the bombing happened months ago, but that's impossible. Sam can't possibly have lost that much time, right?

"A little over four months," Claire says, and Sam shakes his head in disbelief. He's missing four entire months of memories. "Today is February 19, 2018." Sam is only able to nod, to accept the facts. He can't process, can't make himself register what's going on. Claire continues to talk, but the rest of her words are reduced to background noise as Sam tries to sort through the information he's just received. A bomb destroyed half of Lebanon. Connecting that to the newspaper he remembers
reading isn't difficult, and Sam is pretty confident that the demons he and Dean were investigating are the ones who set the bomb. And if Dean was arrested so soon after the blast, someone had to have tipped off the police. Which means that the demons must have set everything up. They wanted to frame Sam and Dean. They had everything planned out.

The black eyes from Sam's dream the other night suddenly make a lot more sense. That wasn't a nightmare, it was a memory.

Sam stands, leg shaking. His head spins, and he grips the edge of the table as he's assaulted by memories of dust and blood and black eyes and people screaming and unimaginable pain, all centered around his right leg. He understands now why his leg is made of metal and plastic. The explosion must have taken it, must have torn it right from his body. And when the demons took him, sometime after the explosion, they probably finished the job. Amputated the rest, cleaned it up. He knows this metal leg, this contraption attached to his body right now, was made by them. Given to him by them to make him useful to them.

The thought makes Sam sick.

Claire is looking at him, worry in her eyes, but all he can think about is her words. About the 50 people that died. 50. 50 lives lost, and the FBI believes Sam is the one responsible. The world thinks Sam killed 50 people. Sam clenches his fist, and the corner of Claire's table crumbles to dust. Sam releases the table as if it shocked him, eyes wide. He can't control himself. He doesn't even know what he can do yet, not really. The blood of 50 people is on his hands already; he can't add more by being reckless. He has to get these powers under control.

He has to get away from anyone he could hurt.

Sam stumbles over to Claire's door, hands shaking too hard to turn the lock. Sam's senses go haywire, and he grips the doorknob tightly, squeezing his eyes shut as the sounds of the city overwhelm him. An ear-piercing screech forces Sam's eyes open and he stares at the door handle, which has been crushed into the shape of his palm. Grimacing, Sam pushes the door open, and it slams into the wall with enough force to make a hole in the drywall. He ignores it, limping down the hallway as fast as he can. He has to get away. From Claire, from everyone. 50 people. 50 lives. Sam pulls down his hood and blinks, watching as the world turns yellow.

Sam isn't just running from the demons anymore. Now he's running from everyone.
Chapter 6

Sam's head spins as he stumbles down the street, avoiding the eyes of everyone he passes. He hopes that they'll think he's just a drunk or a bum, someone utterly forgettable. He prays that no one will recognize him, that no one will figure out who he is, that every person who pushes past him is too focused on more important things to give another thought to the man in the gray hoodie. Sam's fear of the demons is still present, still following him like a shadow, but at the moment there's a new fear invading his mind, a fear of anyone recognizing him, reporting him. His fear of everyone has taken on new meaning, new urgency, and his mind is at war with itself as it tries to decide which would be worse: arrest or capture. Would Sam prefer to be taken by the police, tried, sent to prison? Or captured by the demons from his nightmares, dragged back to the room with the blood-spattered walls?

The correct answer, though apparent to Sam, is still something he has to avoid at all costs.

It takes Sam several minutes of running to reach somewhere far enough from Claire's apartment to feel somewhat safe—the distance Sam puts between them is not so that Sam is safe from Claire, but so that she is safe from him—and only then does he remember that he has somewhere to go. The abandoned warehouse, although not fit for long-term housing, shields Sam from the elements and offers him safety and seclusion, which is more than he can say for the rest of Hell's Kitchen. Besides, he left his crutch there, and despite his several spurts of adrenaline-fueled running over the past couple of days, Sam isn't exactly practiced with his new metal leg. With that thought in mind, Sam turns, prepared to head back to the warehouse.

The problem, Sam promptly realizes, is that he has no idea where it is.

Sam was unconscious when Daredevil took him to Claire's apartment, and although he can remember the intersection nearest to the warehouse, he has no hope of finding it. And there's a certain level of risk involved if Sam continues to roam aimlessly. He knows he's relatively safe in Hell's Kitchen, where Daredevil will likely swoop in at the first sign of trouble, but Sam doesn't know where that part of Manhattan ends and therefore will have no idea if he ventures outside of his temporary safe haven. Sam has to ask for help, but he has no idea where to start.

Luckily, help happens to be walking past right then in the form of a blonde woman around Sam's age.

"Ma'am?" Sam asks cautiously, waiting for the woman to ignore him and keep walking, or scoff and say something about his appearance and how unworthy he is of speaking to her. Her image is one of a high-class businesswoman, or maybe a reporter, well-kept and pristine and the exact opposite of how Sam appears right now. She looks like someone with a respectable career and some money to her name, someone who would probably never want to be seen associating with the kind of person Sam knows he seems to be.

But to his surprise, the woman stops, turning her head curiously. "Can I help you?" She asks, wearing a genuine smile. Sam frowns, trying to figure out what to say, what excuse to give. At the last second, he decides to add a slight Southern accent, just to be safe. He isn't sure how detailed the police reports on him are, and how much was released to the public. Better safe than sorry.

"I, uh, I'm new to the area, and I need to find a building off of 11th and 50th," Sam explains, not necessarily lying but feeling guilty about it nonetheless. "Could you point me in the right direction, if you don't mind?"
"Oh, it's no problem at all." The woman says, waving her hand dismissively. "We aren't that far away, you just need to head that way," she points the way Sam was already heading, "make a left on 11th Street, and go straight for about three blocks. Then you'll be there!"

"Thank you so much," Sam says, making sure his tone conveys how much he means it. The woman just smiles, rummaging in her purse.

"Say, that's the warehouse district you're looking for." She comments, taking out a business card. "I just came from that way. Do you work in the area?"

"No, I'm just, um, meeting a friend." Sam lies nervously. He probably should have realized that a warehouse is a strange place for a tourist to be looking for.

"Well, in that case, take this." The woman says, offering Sam the card. "I'm a reporter for the New York Bulletin, and I'm investigating some crimes in the area. If you see anything strange, call me, okay?" Sam nods, taking the card.

"I will. Thanks again." He says politely, and the woman smiles.

"Anytime." She replies, turning away. Sam watches the woman until she rounds a corner and disappears from view, then looks down at the business card he was given, trying to find the woman's name.

"Karen Page." He says after a minute, committing the name and the number printed beneath it to memory before shoving the card in his pocket and turning toward what Page identified as the warehouse district. As he walks, Sam recalls the image of Page in his mind, making sure he remembers every detail. He'll have to make sure to avoid her in the future. Just asking for directions was risky, even more so because she's a reporter. If anyone besides the cops will be able to identify Sam by sight, it will be a reporter.

If Sam doesn't want to spend the rest of his life in a cell, he's going to have to be more careful.

When Sam finally reaches the warehouse district, he encounters his next problem.

The uniform concrete buildings he observed the night before are here and easily recognizable, except that there are a lot more of them than Sam remembers. Every structure in every direction is nearly identical, and as he stands beneath the sign that marks the intersection of 11th and 50th, Sam realizes that he doesn't actually know which direction his abandoned warehouse is in.

A voice in Sam's head tells him to forget it, to pick a building at random and stay there or, better yet, run for the hills or the country and hide out until this whole thing blows over. He doesn't really need the crutch—after all, he got all the way here without it—just a place to lay low until he can figure out what to do next. But another side of his mind protests and Sam finds himself desperate to recover the rusted metal crutch that helped him escape his captors. He's confused as to why until he realizes that, other than the prosthetic currently attached to his body, the metal crutch is the only thing Sam has that actually belongs to him. Not even the clothes on his back are actually his.

And with Lebanon in ashes and the bunker and Sam's few friends out of his reach, there's no telling when he'll get any of his possessions back—if he ever does.

With a renewed sense of determination, Sam picks a direction and starts walking, looking up at the sun and wishing he had had the foresight to figure out at least which cardinal direction the building was facing before he followed a drunk man into an alley last night. Sam tries door handles and knocks on windows all the way up and down the block with no success, then picks another
direction and heads down the next block. By the time he reaches the fourth street, the sun is
directly overhead, and Sam's stomach is growling softly.

Sam continues his routine of pushing on doors and looking in windows, so deep in his own
thoughts that he almost misses the flash of red he glimpses through one dirty window pane as he
walks past. Backtracking, Sam peers inside the window, spotting no sign of the red. What he does
see, however, is his rusted crutch lying in the center of the room, right where he left it.

Sam continues forward to the door and tries the handle, unsurprised to find it unlocked—after all,
that's why he ended up staying here in the first place. He lets himself inside and heads for the
crutch, stopping in his tracks a few feet away when he hears something moving in the shadows to
his right.

"Who's there?" Sam asks, turning slowly. Every muscle in his body tenses as a figure steps out of
the darkness, then relaxes again when Sam registers the unmistakable red and black suit of the
Devil of Hell's Kitchen.

"Hello, Sam." Daredevil says nonchalantly, acting as if he wasn't waiting in a dark corner for Sam
to get home—not that this is Sam's home.

"Daredevil," Sam replies, frowning. "Claire said you were at work."

"I was." Daredevil says. "I'm on my lunch break. Figured I'd stop by."

"Well, you beat me here." Sam points out. "Also, why? You're a superhero, and I'm Public Enemy
Number 1. You should be tying me to post and calling the cops right now."

"Last night, I watched you run to the aid of a woman screaming for help." Daredevil says. "They
say a lot of things about you, Sam Winchester, but they've never called you a hero. And yet, you
acted like one last night."

"Saving one person doesn't make me a hero." Sam protests.

"I agree." Daredevil replies. "But you don't seem like the type to stop at one. Last night you put on
a mask, told the 911 operator that you were 'someone new.' That's not the behavior of someone
planning to save just one person. That sounds like someone who's trying to become a hero."

"So?" Sam asks. "I'm still a wanted criminal. A killer."

"Are you?" Daredevil asks. "It seems to me like you didn't even know the Lebanon bombing had
happened. Makes me wonder if you're really the one who did it."

"It doesn't matter if I did," Sam says. "The police think I did, and besides, I'm wanted for a whole
lot more than that."

"You don't act like the killer the police thinks you are." Daredevil reasons. "And even if you are,
people can change. There are several crime-fighters out there who started out with less-than-stellar
reputations."

"Why are you really here?" Sam asks, crossing his arms. Daredevil smirks, then sighs.

"I figured that considering your surprise at the whole 'yellow eyes' thing, you don't have much
experience with whatever abilities you have." He explains. "I'm here to offer to help you learn to
control them. Train you, if you will. I'll help you become a vigilante, a hero. At the very least, I'll
help you get your powers under wraps, so you don't accidentally hurt someone." That statement
gives Sam pause, makes him seriously consider. Isn't accidentally hurting someone exactly what he's afraid of?

However, Daredevil's next words quickly shut down Sam's hope.

"If, of course, you promise not to do any more killing."

It isn't the request that makes Sam hesitate but the phrasing. The request itself makes sense. Daredevil, along with most superheroes, likes to lock his enemies away rather than kill them. It's entirely logical that he'd ask Sam to do the same. But he said 'more.' Any more killing. Which tells Sam all he needs to know.

Daredevil may want to train Sam, may be willing to give him a second chance, may even think Sam is innocent of the Lebanon bombing, but he still believes that Sam is the killer everyone thinks he is. And Sam can't find it in him to disagree.

"I don't think that being a hero is in the cards for me," Sam says with a heavy heart. Sure, he wants to be, he would love to be, but he can't. Not now, not with the Lebanon bombing hanging over his head, not with the supernatural world and the real world both trying to track him down. "I don't want to kill, but I don't want anyone getting hurt, either. And that includes you."

"I can take care of myself." Daredevil says, sounding a little smug.

"That doesn't matter," Sam replies. "People who get close to me tend to die horribly, regardless of their self-defense skills. And on top of that, now I've got some variety of super strength I have no idea how to control. And you may think you can teach me to, but I don't. I'm not sure that's even possible. I'm dangerous, Daredevil. No amount of training will change that."

"Very well." Daredevil says, conceding. "But I do have something to give you regardless." He turns, picking up a garbage bag and walking over to Sam, holding it out. "I couldn't help but notice that you don't really have much."

"I can't take this," Sam says immediately, shaking his head and taking a step back. Daredevil smiles, placing the bag on the floor next to Sam's crutch and heading for the door.

"It's not from me, Sam." He says with a smile. "Consider it a gift from the woman you saved last night." Daredevil is already on the sidewalk by the time Sam works up the courage to speak up.

"Wait." He says, and the vigilante stops. Daredevil doesn't turn around, simply tilting his head to one side. Sam takes that to mean that he's listening. "Regardless of my heroics last night, I'm still a wanted killer," Sam says, confused. "I don't even know if I'm guilty. So how could you?"

"I can be quite observant." Daredevil says. "I've met a few psychopaths in my time, Sam Winchester. You may be a criminal, but you're not one of them." He disappears into the street without another word, leaving Sam alone in the abandoned warehouse. Sam waits for a few moments, listening, and when he hears no sign of the horned vigilante, he finally turns to the garbage bag, opening it up.

The majority of the contents are clothes, jeans and t-shirts in various sizes as well as socks and underwear. There are two hoodies similar to the one Sam is wearing and a pair of tennis shoes, and when Sam pulls the sneakers out, he spots a key in the heel of one, taped to a note with an address and the word 'showers' written on it. Beneath the shoes are a cheap wallet with two twenties inside and a burner phone with two numbers programmed in, one under 'C' and one under 'DD.' There's a box of granola bars that Sam pulls out, intending to eat one, but he's stopped when a flash of silver..."
catches his eye. Nestled beneath the box and wrapped carefully inside one of the hoodies is a silver laptop, surprisingly similar to the one Sam left at the bunker, and a charging cable. Like the key, the laptop has a note taped to it, and Sam smiles as he reads the words scrawled in Daredevil's childlike and endearingly messy handwriting.

'Claire said you might want to reconnect to the outside world. I'm inclined to agree.

-DD'
Chapter 7

Darkness, all around him. Something over his eyes, blocking his sight. Laughter. A deep voice, reprimanding someone. Footsteps, approaching rapidly. A sharp pain on the back of his head as a fist grabs his hair, pulling him back. A grunt forced from his chest, shortly followed by a quiet moan. More laughter. Something sharp, hitting his chest, and the world lights up. White shapes, all around him, glowing. They're dim. He doesn't understand exactly what he's seeing, but he does know that the glowing figures don't look right. Don't look human. Instead, they look... dark. Demonic. There is one figure, though, that does look human. It's smaller than the rest. The discharge of a gun and the human falls. Something sharp in his chest once again. Laughter. The white figures fade away.

It's been a long time since Sam last woke up slowly.

He's tried desperately to sleep in, wasting away months trying one method or another, only for each and every one to inevitably fail. And so every morning, day after day, Sam shoots into a seated position, eyes wide, face pale, chest heaving, as twisted memories claw at his mind, leaving gashes on his consciousness that never quite heal, wounds that turn into scars that burn whenever he pokes at those memories again. Sometimes the nightmares fade within seconds, but more often than not they follow Sam like a shadow, clinging to his brain and haunting him throughout the day. Waiting in the back of his mind to overwhelm him when he least expects it.

Even when he's knocked unconscious on a hunt or passes out, Sam's awakening is sudden.

The morning after he met Claire and Karen Page is no exception. As Sam's eyes fly open, images of distorted, glowing white figures invade his mind, searing into the back of his skull even as the rest of the details of his nightmare rapidly fade. Sam has no idea what the white figures are, or rather were, since he's pretty sure the nightmare was at least partially another memory. Unfortunately, that's pretty much all he's sure about.

The missing memories unnerve Sam, reminding him a little of his time with Death's wall in his head years ago. Is it possible that the wall in his mind now, blocking the memories of the past four and a half months, was put into place by someone else, like the first one was? Or is this the work of Sam's own mind, desperate to save him from horrific memories that can only escape in his dreams?

It doesn't really matter who put the blockade in Sam's mind, though. What matters is how important his missing memories are. Even now, knowing what happened in the days after his memory cut out—or at least, what happened three days later—and having a vague and unsettling idea of what followed, Sam can't even begin to crack the barrier that keeps those memories at bay. He's been given the details, he's had flashes of memories, but for the most part, his mind is a blank slate. And now that he knows how much time he's really missing, Sam is all too aware of the large empty space where those four months should be.

He needs to know what happened to him, what happened to Dean. He has to understand. And maybe, if he's lucky, his memories will return one day. Maybe one day, Sam will have his own point of view of the events of the past several months. Until then, he'll just have to settle for everyone else's.

Sam turns slowly, eyes falling on the bag Daredevil left him the previous day. The blanket he used as a bed was shoved beneath several pairs of jeans, and Sam takes one of these now, changing out
of his borrowed sweatpants. He'll have to find a way to get them back to Claire without taking them himself. Sam knows better than to go back to her apartment.

With a soft sigh and a shake of his head—a useless attempt to dislodge the stubborn nightmare that still hangs over him—Sam grabs the laptop Daredevil gave him. Sam has no idea how he's ever going to repay the vigilante, because although yesterday he thought this computer was somewhat similar to his own, Sam can see now that it's far better, far more expensive than anything he's ever owned in his life.

Sam had better put it to good use.

As soon as he opens a browser, Sam is typing his brother's name into the search bar. He's relatively sure that Claire told him most of the major details, but he has to make sure he knows everything he possibly can. And a small part of Sam's mind is still nagging at him, still hoping that the nurse was lying, that Dean is in the bunker right now, perfectly safe. Sam has to see his brother's fate with his own eyes to believe it. He needs physical proof before he can successfully convince himself that it's not a prank, or torture, or a hallucination.

The fingers on Sam's left hand curl into a fist, his fingernails pressing against the scar on his palm. He doesn't even notice.

Instead, all of Sam's attention is on the news articles that cover the first page of the search results. Every article has his brother's name in it, preceded by some negative description—serial killer or murderer or even terrorist—and followed by a headline that includes the word Lebanon, or trial, or court. Sam clicks on the first link—**SERIAL KILLER DEAN WINCHESTER CHARGED WITH LEBANON BOMBING DEATHS**—and reads through it, reads about how Dean was found in Lebanon as he ran from the explosion, how the police arrested him on the spot, how they didn't even identify him until he was already at the station. And that's even more damning in Sam's mind: Dean wasn't arrested because he was Dean Winchester, he was arrested because he was running away.

Sam bites down on the inside of his cheek, grinding his teeth together until he tastes blood, until there's a hole in his skin that radiates pain every time he prods it with his tongue.

And Sam continues to aggravate it periodically as he finishes the article and starts on the next—**INFAMOUS MURDERER DEAN WINCHESTER DENIED BAIL IN LEBANON BOMBING CASE**—using the pain to hold himself down, to convince himself that this is real. That this isn't just a terrible nightmare, an echo from Hell, a piece of the Cage that he'll never be truly able to escape.

Sam learns that Dean is being held in Washington DC, or just outside it anyway, in a detainment center for federal offenders. Dean was denied bail, denied a request to be placed in protective custody, and he's basically being treated like a convicted killer even though his trial hasn't even started yet. It's insane, it's probably a breach of Dean's rights, and there isn't a single thing Sam can do about it. If he were to ask a lawyer, they'd probably tell him that there isn't a rulebook for this, that Dean's case is special—after all, Dean isn't even technically an American citizen, considering the fact that he's legally dead.

Sam learns a lot about how his brother spent the past four months, but he also learns more details about the Lebanon bombing. He learns the exact location where the bomb was planted: not just any Biggerson's—there are two in the small town of Lebanon, or at least there were—but the one that Sam and Dean happened to frequent. He learns the exact number of casualties: 52 dead, 96 wounded. He learns that 11 people are still in the hospital, and three of them are still in comas, and one is a five-year-old girl. He learns that everyone in the country wants Sam Winchester found,
dead or alive, and that the police haven't been ordered to shoot on sight but they might just because they can, because Lebanon was the stereotypical American small town and everybody knows somebody who lives in a town just like it. He learns that this bombing is being treated like a terrorist attack and the Winchester brothers like terrorists.

Sam Winchester is the most hated man in the United States and probably the world. He was never a hero, never even a good person, but now he never will be. Sam lost his chance to change his fate, to save his name, to make himself better in the public eye, and he doesn't even remember how it happened.

What interests Sam, though, is how the FBI is convinced that he's actually out there somewhere. Sam wasn't even seen in Lebanon, hadn't been seen for years before that. Several of the articles he's read speculate that he might have died in the blast—four months later and Lebanon is still in pieces, and three of the 52 dead aren't actually confirmed dead, just missing—or even before it. One writer even suggested that Sam's death could have been Dean's breaking point, leading him to plant the bomb. But the police are convinced that he's out there, that he's alive and healthy and just really, really good at hiding.

And so what if that's exactly what he's doing? The police don't know that.

Spurred by Sam's thoughts, memories of the explosion and its aftermath begin to push at Sam's mind and he grimaces, opening a new tab and finding a website for a more localized paper. He needs something to distract him, something to take his mind off of all of the horrible things the world thinks he's done. He reads everything he sees, no matter how boring or irrelevant, just trying to force his thoughts away from the very topic that's probably occupying the thoughts of pretty much everyone else.

He finds a story about a local lawyer who just finished his first case without his ex-partner. An article listing the latest crimes and villains stopped by Daredevil—including the prosecutor in that lawyer's case, apparently. An editorial by a man named Jameson who thinks 'costumed menaces' like Spider-Man and Daredevil are the worst thing that's ever happened to the world and that they should all be arrested. But what eventually draws Sam's eye is a seemingly trivial headline, small and hidden away as if it's unimportant, as if it's old news, that describes the latest attack in the reign of terror of a man known only as 'the Demon'. Sam opens the article without a second thought.

The Demon is, as far as Sam can tell, a new-ish threat in Hell's Kitchen. He doesn't get his hands dirty, sending out an army of henchmen to do his work, and he's very secretive, to the point where even his lower-level goons haven't seen him, according to the several who have been arrested. They're the ones who gave him his name. Apparently, the Demon's underlings think that he's so mystical and so evil that he can't possibly be human. That he's a demon. The rest of Hell's Kitchen seems to think the Demon is just a guy with a lot of power and maybe some enhanced abilities, but the nickname stuck regardless.

Sam isn't sure if the lackeys are right or the general public. He also isn't sure if he wants to know.

Sam decides to leave the supervillain stories behind for the moment, turning his attention instead to a small article about a murder outside of the city, in a small suburb to the east. It's unremarkable—the local police are calling it a break-in gone wrong—but Sam has been trained his entire life to look for certain signs of not-so-unremarkable things, and he finds a pretty obvious one in this story.

The victim, who was killed in her home at around midnight, was scratched by long claws, like those of a wild animal. That alone is unusual, especially so close to a large city—and Sam can't help but wonder how the police got a botched robbery from a body covered in claw marks—but
what really seals the deal is the fact that the woman's chest was torn open and her heart was missing. The story screams werewolf, and the more Sam looks, the more likely it seems. A few quick Google searches tell Sam that the night of the murder coincided with a full moon and that there have been several other 'home invasions'—seriously, the police should have at least classified them as animal attacks or something—in the same small town over the past year, one or two a month, every month, at the same time each month. Coinciding with the full moon, of course. Luckily for Sam, the next full moon isn't for another week and a half. That means he has time to do more research, figure out who the wolf is and where they're hiding, and decide if he's willing to risk his own safety to kill them.

There's a new risk, Sam realizes, on top of the already unpredictable hazard that is hunting. In the past, if Sam was caught during a hunt, all he needed to do was break out and leave town or call Bobby or Jody. But now, now his face is on the wall of every police precinct in the country. If Sam gets himself arrested during a hunt now, there won't be any quick escapes or white lies.

Is he really willing to risk his newfound freedom just to stop a single werewolf?

The laptop dings, pulling Sam out of his thoughts, and he turns to see a low power notification in the middle of the screen. Sam reaches into the bag Daredevil gave him, digging around and pulling out the laptop's charging cord. As the cord comes out of the bag, it catches on what appears to be a piece of black fabric, pulling it out as well. Sam picks up the textile, finding the edges and pulling it straight. It takes a minute for Sam to figure out what exactly he's holding, but his eyes quickly widen when he realizes the significance of the seemingly useless cloth.

It isn't just a bolt of fabric, it's a scarf. A black scarf. And it's almost identical to the one Sam used in the alley to hide his face.

With a grin, Sam puts the scarf down on top of the bag, turns back to the computer, and dives into his research. After all, there are only ten days until the full moon, and he has a werewolf to kill.
Chapter 8

Sam spent most of his childhood hungry. When he was still in the single digits, John would leave a set amount of money behind before he left on a hunt, claiming that he'd be back well before it ran out. Dean knew better, but even when he stretched the money as far as he could, it would still run out before John returned home. Sam's meals before the money ran out consisted mostly of microwave mac and cheese and various other cheap grocery store dinners, and after Dean ran out of cash meals turned into an apple or a poptart. After Dean was old enough to get a job, his income helped supplement the food supply, but not by much. Usually, it just meant that the apples and poptarts started a few days later than they would have otherwise.

So obviously, Sam is used to surviving on next to nothing. Because of that—and the somewhat disconcerting fact that, despite not being able to recall the last time he had a full meal, Sam has yet to get as hungry as he would hours after a meal in the time before the bombing, before the demons—it takes four days before he finishes off all five of the granola bars Daredevil left him. He doesn't leave the warehouse during that time, that fear of everyone around him still overbearing, still clinging to him like the terrifying nightmares that just might be memories. Sam knows that he'll have to leave eventually, have to go out and get food and visit the showers Daredevil gave him access to—a quick Google search revealed that the address on the note is that of an old gym—but he also knows that the world is almost as unsafe for Sam as he is for it. After all, it only takes one person recognizing Sam from a wanted poster or a news broadcast to send him straight to prison in handcuffs.

When Sam's stomach starts growling at around noon, he knows he has no food, but he looks into the box of granola bars anyway. Pretends to still have that little bit of childish hope, pretends that there's still someone out there looking out for him.

Just like the box, Sam's support system is empty.

Daredevil hasn't returned since he dropped off the bag, but he has been busy. According to the New York Bulletin's website, the Devil of Hell's Kitchen has spent the last four days taking down a human trafficking ring. Sam can't blame him for not coming back. Human trafficking obviously takes precedence over a wanted killer hiding out in the warehouse district.

But without Daredevil, Sam has no one to help him. He has three numbers in his phone and several more in his mind but he isn't willing to call any of them, isn't willing to risk someone tracking him down, someone turning him in. And if no one can come help Sam, Sam has no choice but to leave. He has to take a shower, find some weapons, figure out how he's going to get from Hell's Kitchen to Maplewood, New Jersey, where the werewolf killings are happening. At the very least, he needs to stock up on food.

Of course, Sam isn't going to venture outside unprepared. He's had four days to figure out his best course of action, utilizing Daredevil's laptop—despite the vigilante's insistence on everything in the bag being a gift, Sam doesn't feel comfortable acknowledging such an expensive computer as his own—to locate the nearest stores. Unfortunately, the warehouse district isn't exactly known for its shopping opportunities, so the only thing Sam could find within comfortable walking distance—he still hasn't gotten the hang of using a prosthetic leg, although not for lack of trying—is a small, locally owned coffee shop about two blocks away from the abandoned warehouse. It's not ideal, seeing as Sam need nutrients, not caffeine, but it's the only thing Sam can get to at the moment.

On the bright side, it has croissants.
With a heavy sigh, Sam pushes himself to his feet, massaging the knots in his neck with one hand. The blanket he's been using as a mattress is significantly more comfortable than the concrete floor on its own, but just as hard. Sam's body aches constantly, although if his uncomfortable housing situation is to blame is a mystery. The pains could just as likely be a residual effect of the demons' torture, or even something as simple as the slightly accelerated healing of Sam's numerous injuries from the alley fight.

Sam shoves his burner phone into one pocket of his jeans and the cheap leather wallet into another, pulling one of the hoodies on over his t-shirt. Some of Sam's time over the past four days has been dedicated to using the things he has to create the things he doesn't, and he grabs one of the results of that endeavor now, slipping it over his shoulder. Thanks to a couple of Pinterest boards and an excess amount of white t-shirts, Sam was able to create a sort of rudimentary messenger bag—he's extremely thankful for Daredevil's kindness, but the vigilante didn't supply Sam with any means of transporting his new belongings, other than the garbage bag, which Sam can't exactly carry around town. Sam shoves a couple extra shirts into the bottom of his bag to pad it, then puts the laptop inside along with its charger. Satisfied, Sam heads for the door, unsure whether he's looking more forward to the heating, the food, or the human interaction. Once he reaches the sidewalk, however, Sam pauses, turning back and glancing at the metal crutch lying on the floor between his blanket mattress and Daredevil's bag of gifts. Should he bring his crutch or leave it behind?

On the one hand, the crutch would offer Sam both balance and stability, making the walk notably easier. On the other hand, however, it's a major identifying feature, and one thing Sam is depending on is his forgettability. The general public is much more likely to pay attention to a man with a crutch than one without, and even more likely to recognize him as the same person if they happen to cross paths again. And the more attention someone gives Sam, the more likely it is that they'll recognize him.

Sam shakes his head, biting his cheek and walking away from the warehouse. He needs to learn to get around without the crutch anyway. The sooner Sam is able to walk without a limp, the sooner he can start pretending that everything is going to be okay again.

By the time Sam reaches the coffee shop, he's seriously regretting his decision. It's extremely cold outside, colder than Sam was expecting, and his left leg is so frozen it's acting like his right one—that is, numb and rigid. Sam's arms are just as cold, his hoodie effectively useless against the biting Manhattan winter.

When Sam pushes the door of the coffee shop open and steps inside, he's immediately assaulted by a wave of hot air, the temperature change so sudden that it feels like the heat is physically attacking him. Sam's breath catches in his throat as memories of the too-hot room with the bleeding walls threaten to overwhelm him, but the deep breath he forces into his chilled lungs welcomes familiar scents of coffee beans and cinnamon, and Sam finds himself propelled into another, more pleasant memory instead.

Instead of the red and gray walls of the room from his nightmares, Sam sees the dark wood panels of a small coffee shop in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He sees his brother sitting across the room reading the paper, a scarf looped casually around his neck. He sees two coffees in his hands, one black and one with milk and two sugars, and he sees himself walking over to Dean, handing him the black coffee and sitting down across from him. Sam sees Dean laugh, sees the paper disappear from view, sees his brother lean forward, interested in whatever Sam is saying. Sam doesn't know, doesn't remember the conversation, but he does remember the emotions. The feeling of safety, of warmth, of overwhelming happiness.
Sam hasn't felt like that in a long time.

Sam pulls himself forcefully out of the memory and finds himself standing in a different coffee shop, not as quaint, not as safe, but just as warm. He walks up to the counter and orders a coffee with milk and two sugars and a croissant, giving the girl behind the counter a warm smile and one of his two twenty dollar bills.

While he's waiting for his drink, Sam finds himself drawn to a cork board covered in bright sheets of paper, each selling a service or offering a class of some kind. There are classes for martial arts and painting, a dog walking service, and someone offering their aid as a high school math tutor. The poster that catches Sam's eye is sky blue, with a title in large block letters and a picture of a computer in the bottom left-hand corner. It's an advertisement for an online school that offers free classes in a variety of subject areas, ranging from the usual school subjects like English and History to more specific—and unusual—concentrations like Ceramics and something called Kitchen Chemistry.

Sam's name is called and he turns away from the board, shaking his head as he disagrees with the wishful thought that invades his mind. Once he has his coffee and croissant, Sam wanders over to a small table in the corner that has a cushioned chair on either side of it, sinking into one and setting his croissant down. He pulls the laptop out of his bag, setting it down beside his pastry and taking a long sip of his drink as he powers the laptop on. The coffee is hot, but not uncomfortably so, although even the moderate temperature of the coffee shop heater is troublingly close to setting off the volatile memories just below the surface of Sam's mind. Shaking his head as if the motion will dislodge the memories, Sam starts to look for more stories about the werewolf in Maplewood, even though he already knows that there won't have been any new attacks.

As Sam skims through an article he's already read twice before, he finds his mind wandering back to the sky blue poster with the little computer in the corner. It's been over a decade since Sam left Stanford with the intent to return within months, and he's long since given up any hope of finishing his schooling and becoming a lawyer. But unlike Dean, who only got as much education as he did because John wanted his sons to at least have a GED, Sam genuinely enjoyed school, enjoyed learning new things and making friends both in fellow students and in his teachers. He's actually considered taking online courses in the past, mostly in the months between Jessica's death and John's, but the idea never really left. It never gained any traction either, and Sam never once vocalized his idea to Dean. Internally, Sam always knew that hunting left no time for something as trivial as an online math class.

But things are different now. Sam may have found one werewolf, sure, but the main reason that so much of Sam's life has been spent on the road is that monsters don't tend to cluster. Once you salt and burn a ghost in one town, it's time to move on to the next, because there won't be anything else there for a while. Of course, several hunters are sedentary, protecting their own town and maybe the ones surrounding it and finding plenty to do, but there will never be as many hunts in one place as there will if you actively search them out. A big city like New York is bound to have a higher monster population than the small towns the Winchesters frequented for most of Sam's life, but it's also bound to have a higher population of hunters, and there's no way Sam would need to—or even be able to—finish one hunt and immediately jump to the next.

Sam's entire life has revolved around the wishes of his father, then of Dean. The only decision Sam has actually made for himself was when he chose to leave his family behind and attend Stanford, and despite the horrors that followed, it's a decision Sam doesn't regret in the least.

Before he can change his mind, Sam opens a new tab in his browser, typing in the web address from the advertisement and hitting enter. The website for the online school loads relatively quickly
and Sam creates an account, signing up for a class in ethical hacking—if he's really going to do this, he might as well learn something relevant—and scanning the list for another course to take. Sam skips over anything that takes longer than a few months and any classes that look like they might require any kind of collaboration with others, and after a minute his eyes land on one, in particular, that makes every muscle in his body tense.

It's a law course.

Despite the fact that his dreams of being a lawyer were pretty much crushed a long time ago, Sam has to admit that he does still appreciate the course material. After all, as much as he told himself—and his dad—that becoming a lawyer was just his way of helping people in a way that's a little more legal than hunting, Sam was actually genuinely interested in what he was studying. This course appears to be basic knowledge, things like how a courtroom operates and a simplified list of US federal and state laws. Simple, convenient, and relevant. After all, even if he can never become an attorney, Sam could definitely use a refresher on laws, individual rights, and court proceedings. A basic law education could come in handy just in case he does eventually get arrested.

With both of his classes selected, Sam continues to create his account, putting in one of his several email addresses—this one specifically isn't tied to a particular name, making it useful for keeping up various aliases at once—and using Bobby's birth date with his own birth year. Most of the rest of the information Sam fills out the same way, citing an address he might have lived at once when he was seven and a phone number that belonged to Dean in 2009. Then he finds himself hesitating on the final blank boxes that ask for his full name. For some reason, despite lying on literally every other entry, Sam really wants to tell the truth here. He wants to be himself, just this once, for this one thing that's so important to him.

It's a pipe dream, and he knows it. The second Sam's name ends up anywhere, the FBI will be on top of him. He's too important for them not to. He can't risk anything that connects this to him, at least directly. How far will the police go to track him down?

With a sigh, Sam puts down the first two names that come to mind, hitting enter and creating his account. It's only when his profile page loads and his new name appears on screen that Sam realizes what exactly he just typed in.

Henry Michaels. His and Dean's middle names.
Chapter 9

It's almost midnight when Sam steps off of the bus in Maplewood, New Jersey, and despite the fact that the town is blanketed in darkness, he has to stop for a moment just to appreciate his surroundings. Maplewood isn't a particularly large city, especially compared to its neighbor, but it's still larger than most of the small towns Sam is used to. The bus dropped Sam off in the middle of a quaint neighborhood full of white picket fences, groomed gardens, and swing sets. The small community is picturesque, the perfect image of the American suburb. Every house is just enough like its neighbor to create a sense of unity, but at the same time, each home is an individual, representative of the family that lives within. The neighborhood looks just like the one Sam dreamt about in college, back when he still had hopes of settling down and raising a family. The neighborhood looks perfect, friendly, beautiful, but Sam knows better. He knows that on one of these perfect streets, in one of these perfect houses, an angry werewolf lies in wait, planning his next kill.

Sam knows he doesn't have long before the wolf attacks, but he also knows that he can't just walk into a hunt empty handed. And while Daredevil's gifts were useful, the vigilante didn't exactly supply Sam with the tools required for his trade. So instead of heading into the heart of the neighborhood, Sam turns away, walking instead into a convenience store just outside of the community.

He doesn't have the money for everything he needs, so Sam shops lightly, grabbing only a silver-plated pocket knife and a pair of black gloves before heading for the counter. He hands the cashier the last of the cash from Daredevil's cheap faux-leather wallet, smiling as genuinely as he can as he waits for the teen to ring him up and prays that the kid doesn't care enough to recognize him. Within a minute Sam is pocketing his change and stuffing his goods into his pockets, and he leaves the store as quickly as he can, head low. He circles around the back of the store and ducks behind a dumpster, swapping out his hoodie for the black jacket Daredevil left him. Sam pulls his mask out of his bag and shoves the hoodie inside, dropping the bag against the wall as he ties the mask around his head, covering his mouth. Sam can't risk saving the werewolf's victim just for them to turn around and call the cops on him, so instead of fighting this wolf as Sam Winchester, he's going to do it as the vigilante alter-ego he accidentally created that night in the alley. Besides, if Daredevil gets his way, Sam might end up using this persona more often, so he ought to get used to it.

As Sam heads for Creekside Drive, he pulls on his new gloves, stretching them out with his fingers. He tests his grip on the knife, making sure it won't slip from his grasp before tucking it back into his pocket. Rather than heading down the street, Sam turns into the alley, counting houses until he finds the one that belongs to William McPherson. In the past, Sam hasn't had enough time to create a fully-fledged plan, often discovering wolves and other creatures right in the middle of killing sprees and as a result having to rush to find and kill the monsters. But this time, freed from his father's—and, though he hates to admit it, brother's—impulsive orders and commanded instead by the cycle of the moon, Sam was able to identify not only the werewolf but also his next victim. Hence Sam's arrival not at the house of Ray Terris, the werewolf, but that of William McPherson, Terris's victim of choice.

Sam is heading for the gate to McPherson's backyard when he hears a crash and a scream, and he realizes that despite his planning, he's still running late. He promptly breaks into a sprint, turning his eyes yellow with a blink as he catapults himself over the gate—and promptly ends up face-first in a patch of tulips. Sam jumped the fence with his right leg first and his prosthetic, created more for walking than for brief runs of sprinting, couldn't take the strain and buckled. Or
maybe Sam just landed funny, and if it had been the other leg, he would have sprained his ankle. Since Sam can't feel anything past mid-thigh, he has no way of knowing what exactly went wrong. All he knows is that this hunt may turn out to be a little harder than he thought.

Sam's internal speculation is cut short by another scream from inside the house. This one is higher, distinctly female, and Sam is 99% sure that William McPherson's wife, Teresa, just stumbled upon Terris trying to kill her husband.

Dragging himself to his feet, Sam runs toward the house, pulling the knife out of his pocket as he rams into the back door shoulder-first. The door creaks but doesn't give, so Sam strikes again, this time putting the full force of his body into the shove. At the second attack, the wood splinters, and Sam pushes his way into the McPherson house.

The first thing Sam realizes once he's inside is that he's too late.

William McPherson is lying on the rug in his living room, bleeding profusely from the four deep claw marks on his chest. He's staring straight up at the ceiling, and it doesn't take a genius—or the absence of the white glow that Sam's yellow vision usually assigns to human beings—to know that the man is either dead or about to be. Teresa McPherson is huddled in the far corner of the room, staring not at her husband's body but at Ray Terris, who is stalking toward her with a huge smirk and blood on his hands. When Sam steps into the living room, Teresa is the first to see him, and her expression shifts from absolute terror to something more akin to relieved confusion. Terris, noticing this change, turns around, eyes widening at the sight of Sam.

"Who the hell are you?" Terris asks, his voice a low growl. He looks Sam over, pausing a couple of times to consider Sam's yellow eyes and mask, but he doesn't react until his eyes land on the knife in Sam's hand. Then the werewolf lunges without hesitation, claws extended and a feral snarl erupting from his lips. Sam dives out of the way, avoiding the attack, but he finds himself crashing to the ground for the second time. In his day-to-day, mostly sedentary life, Sam can almost forget about his prosthetic, but now that he's in the middle of a fight, Sam is forced to realize that his metal leg is just a little bit heavier than his flesh and bone one. The slight weight difference is enough to put Sam off-balance, and in a high-stakes fight like this, that's a sufficient disadvantage. Until Sam is more practiced with his prosthetic, Terris—and any other enemy he happens to meet—will have the upper hand.

The werewolf seems to have come to the same conclusion because his second lunge is calculated, not rushed. This time, rather than just pouncing, Terris aims for Sam's good leg, and Sam barely has time to roll out of the werewolf's path as Terris crashes into the coffee table. The wood splinters and Terris hits the floor hard, but the impact barely affects him at all, and within seconds he's back on his feet, turning back around to face Sam.

Sam pulls himself to his feet, ignoring the ache in his not-quite-healed ribs as he brandishes his knife, trying his best to look threatening. Terris does pause, appearing somewhat hesitant—but now, he's probably figured out that Sam is a hunter, albeit an unusual one—but he apparently decides that Sam isn't as dangerous as he's trying to appear, because it only takes a few seconds for the werewolf to make up his mind and attack once again. Sam doesn't have time to dodge the assault and he's tackled to the floor by Terris. As Sam slams into the ground, the knife flies from his grasp, skidding across the room and coming to a stop near the entryway to the kitchen, far out of Sam's reach.

"You're probably the worst hunter I've ever met." Terris comments, his hands holding Sam's arms against the wooden floor. Sam struggles, trying to push the werewolf off, but the super strength he used in the alley is nowhere to be found. Without his abilities, Sam is no match for the enhanced
strength typical of a werewolf. He's trapped.

Sam sees movement out of the corner of his eye and feels relieved despite himself, his instincts taking over. The form reveals itself to be that of Teresa and Sam's heart sinks, although he isn't entirely sure why. He finds himself waiting for a blond with green eyes to swoop in and save him, or a raven-haired man with bright blue eyes, but neither comes. Sam is alone. Sam looks up at Terris and starts wiggling, trying to free himself from the werewolf's grasp. Terris just looks amused.

As Sam squirms, he becomes aware of the warm liquid pooling beneath him, and an idea forms in his mind.

"Why are you killing these people?" Sam asks, trying to distract his enemy. The floor is slick with blood, and Sam might be able to use that to his advantage. If he can get Terris to loosen his hold enough, Sam will be able to slip free, using the blood to lose friction. It turns out, though, that a blood-soaked floor isn't necessary for Sam to gain the upper hand.

Terris's response gives Sam all the help he needs.

"Because I can," Terris says with genuine pleasure in his tone, and Sam's blood boils. Even werewolves tend to have hearts, focusing their attacks on criminals or those who wronged them, but Terris is different. Terris is killing because he enjoys it, and that means that he was a monster long before he became a werewolf.

Sam watches as the white glow that is Terris shines brighter and brighter and, losing control of his anger, he yanks his arms free, planting his palms on Terris's chest and shoving him as hard as he can. Sam is expecting Terris to shift a bit or maybe release his hold, but to his surprise, the werewolf flies across the room, crashing straight through a bookcase and slamming into the wall behind it. Books rain down on the stunned wolf as Sam dives for the pocket knife, scooping it up and standing. Terris pulls himself to his feet a little more slowly than Sam does this time, obviously shaken by the force of the throw, and then he growls.

"I'm going to kill you, too," Terris says, "and then I'm going to kill her." He nods to Teresa McPherson, who is still pressed into the corner, watching the fight with wide eyes. "Just because I can." Terris snarls, exposing his pointed teeth. Sam throws the pocket knife as hard as he can as Terris charges, and the knife buries itself so deep in the werewolf's chest that the handle disappears and Terris is stopped in his tracks.

As Terris's eyes glaze over and his body crumples to the floor, Sam breathes a sigh of relief.

"Oh god, Will!" Teresa exclaims from behind Sam, and he turns to see the young woman kneeling beside her husband's body, hands hovering inches above his chest as if she can't bring herself to touch him, to confirm that what she's seeing before her is actually real.

"I'm sorry," Sam finds himself saying, his mind weighed down by the thought that while he killed the werewolf, he failed to save the victim.

"Don't apologize." Teresa replies, looking up at Sam. "You saved my life. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Sam says hesitantly, because what else is he supposed to say? Teresa pulls herself to her feet, grabbing the landline and hitting a couple of numbers before pausing, a frown forming on her face.

"You killed him." She says, nodding in the direction of Terris's body—although, Sam notices, she
makes a point to avoid looking directly at it. Sam nods, biting the inside of his cheek as Teresa looks him over, smiling weakly. "I'm going to have to call the police." She says, angling her head toward the back door. "You should probably leave before they get here." Smiling gratefully, Sam nods, stepping past Teresa and heading for the back door. Once he's outside, he walks past the section of fence that he vaulted over earlier—easily recognizable due to the flattened flowers in front of it—and heads instead for the taller fence at the back of the yard. Sam will need the head start down the alley if he wants to get home without a pit stop at a police station. He hesitates, then, picturing the abandoned warehouse in his mind and sighing, wishing he had more of a home to go back to.

The faint sound of sirens spurs Sam forward, and he starts climbing. As he swings one leg over the top of the fence, Sam turns back one last time to see Teresa McPherson with her phone held between her shoulder and her chin, gripping her husband's hand tightly between both of hers. Sam finds the smile melting from his face as he drops down into the alley. Despite all of his planning, Sam couldn't save William McPherson. It's happened before, of course, where Sam and Dean arrived a little too late to save who would usually become the monster's final victim. It will certainly happen again.

But Sam can't get over the fact that if he hadn't fallen jumping over the fence, he might have been able to save William's life. If Sam had gotten inside three seconds sooner, he could have changed everything. Could have stopped Terris before he dealt that final blow. Could have made it right. But he fell in the garden, and he lost his chance.

Sam thought he was ready, thought he could pretend that there was nothing wrong with him, but he knows better now. He knows that he can't just run around in a mask pretending he's a superhero, and he can't just walk around acting like he's had a metal leg his whole life. He knows that the powers he has aren't just dangerous, they're unpredictable.

He knows that as soon as he gets back to the abandoned warehouse, he's going to call Daredevil.

Sam is so absorbed in his thoughts that he doesn't see the dimly glowing figures that appear suddenly a few yards down the alley. He doesn't hear the instruction one figure gives to the other, doesn't sense the second figure disappearing just as swiftly as he came. He doesn't feel the sudden drop in temperature, doesn't smell the rotten eggs and blood that surround the remaining figure like a cloud of perfume.

It isn't until Sam looks up that he realizes. And by then, he's just feet away from a man with pure black eyes and an evil grin.
Chapter 10

When Sam looks up and meets the coal-black eyes of a smirking man, the blood in his veins turns to ice. Those ebony eyes are paired with a face that Sam has never seen before in his life, but that doesn't necessarily mean Sam hasn't encountered him before. With demons, you can never be sure. The man is middle-aged, his hair patchy and his stomach protruding over his belt, and at first glance, he looks entirely harmless. Sam knows better, though, knows that even the most innocent, fragile child can snap your neck with one hand the second a plume of black smoke forces its way down their throat.

And while Sam can't possibly know if he's met this demon before, that doesn't stop the terror that paralyzes him. Just those black eyes are enough to twist Sam's mind, altering the image before him and turning this man into one of the several figures that haunt Sam's nightmares, one of the demons who tortured him for four months before he was able to escape. This could be another demon entirely, could be one who wasn't present in the room with the red walls, could be one who didn't even know that Sam Winchester was being held in Hell's Kitchen, being tortured and experimented on. But that doesn't make him any less dangerous. Any demon has the ability to take Sam back to the red-walled room, or to kill him, or to incapacitate him and call the police, or to do pretty much anything they please. Every human being in the world is a danger to Sam, capable of stealing away his freedom and subjecting him to a life in prison, but even the most innocuous demon is a million times worse.

Even the least dangerous demon in the world has the power to send Sam back to the room with the red walls.

"So, we've got a little crime-fighter on our hands." The demon says, twisting his expression into a vile grin that looks unnatural on the man's face. "I have to say, I'm disappointed. You could have easily saved that man in there with those powers of yours, but instead, you just let him die. Saved the day, of course, that's what you always do, but there does seem to be a trend forming. Too little, too late." The demon lifts his hand and something silver glistens in the glow of his aura—it's with a degree of apprehension that Sam realizes one of the reasons he didn't see the demon's approach is that his white glow is significantly dimmer than that of a human being—and Sam prepares to move. The demon is fast but Sam is faster, diving out of the way as the demon swipes, his arm coming down fast enough that, had Sam not moved, his torso would have been sliced cleanly in half. Sam is able to examine the blade more closely as the demon stalks forward, and he realizes somewhat uncomfortably that the dagger is remarkably similar to the demon-killing knife Ruby gave to Sam so many years ago. In fact, it looks so much like Ruby's blade that Sam genuinely wonders if it is—after all, the knife wasn't on Sam's person when he escaped, so either the demons took it from him, the FBI took it from Dean, or it was left in the bunker—but he doesn't have enough time to do a mental comparison before the demon is upon him again. "Can't even save one man from a measly werewolf." The demon teases, and Sam's yellow world gets brighter as anger surges through him. He punches the demon as hard as he can and it flies backward, knife flying from its hand as it slams into a car parked in some poor civilian's driveway. Sam runs at the demon, scooping up the knife as he passes by. The demon is still on the ground, disoriented by Sam's throw, when Sam plunges the knife straight down.

At the last second, Sam shifts slightly, so instead of hitting the demon square in the chest, the knife goes into his arm. When Sam told Daredevil he didn't want to kill anymore, he wasn't lying. Sam has always hated having to end the lives of innocent people in order to destroy the monsters inside of them. It's one of the reasons he drank demon blood for as long as he did—the exorcisms he was able to perform were often short enough to keep the demon from killing their vessel before they
were expelled, and the survival rate of people who had had the misfortune of becoming meatsuits rose significantly while Sam held that ability.

With Terris, of course, Sam didn't have a choice. Terris was going to kill Sam and Teresa, had already killed William. Werewolves can be cured, but Terris had revealed himself to be a monster of the human variety as well. Sam doesn't feel too terribly guilty for killing Ray Terris. He was past saving. But every demon can be exorcised. Their vessels can, for the most part, be saved. And Sam is determined to save as many people as he can.

Unfortunately, Sam isn't the hunter he was five months ago, and his new disadvantages outweigh his determination.

The demon shakes off Sam's attack like it was nothing, pulling the knife out of his arm and tossing it to the side. He charges again and Sam dodges to the side once more, only for the demon to latch on to his prosthetic. The demon falls to the ground and pulls Sam with him, and they both end up in a heap. The demon, who was prepared for the fall, quickly gains the upper hand, and Sam finds himself pinned to the ground for the second time that night. Sam tries to kick the demon off but while his left leg sways the monster slightly, his metal one isn't strong enough to do any damage. The rudimentary prosthetic isn't made for jumping, much less fighting, and Sam is pretty sure that it's already on its way to breaking. He isn't willing to risk destroying the only metal limb he has, which means that even if he could kick any harder, he wouldn't. With one leg incapacitated, Sam isn't much of a match for the demon. Within thirty seconds, the demon has Sam's legs pinned down, too.

"Pathetic." The demon sneers. He climbs to his feet and smirks, watching as Sam struggles to do the same. Sam pushes down on his prosthetic and feels the metal bend, and soon he's falling to his knees. The demon lifts a hand and Sam finds his shins glued to the concrete. He's frozen in place, kneeling in an alleyway, trapped and completely at the will of the very creature that haunts him day and night. "No wonder that poor man died. Did you even try?" The demon saunters to Sam's side, looking him up and down as Sam cranes his neck, trying to keep his captor in view. "And to think, you're supposed to be one of the most notorious demon hunters in the world." Sam's eyes widen at this and he starts frantically fighting the demon's hold, which of course only makes the demon's smirk widen. Most demons know who Sam is, of course—like the beast said, he's a relatively famous demon hunter—but he had still hoped somewhat that the mask would at least make the creature hesitate. Now, his last sliver of hope gone, Sam can only pray that the demon decides to do what demons do best and offers some kind of chance at escape. "Sam Winchester, Public Enemy Number 1, missing in action for four months after the infamous Lebanon bombing only to turn up in Manhattan with yellow eyes and a slew of new abilities he doesn't even know how to use. Personally, I wasn't there to see you gain your powers—had some other business to attend to, you see—but a friend was nice enough to keep me informed."

"What do you want?" Sam asks, glaring at the demon. His vision brightens significantly and the demon steps back, unnerved. Sam figures that his eyes probably change when his vision brightens, perhaps darkening or even glowing. The idea gives Sam a little bit of satisfaction. Black-eyed demons may act like they're the top dogs, but they're no match for a yellow-eyed demon, and this guy knows it.

"I want to offer you the chance to escape." The demon says, recovering his composure and putting on a warm smile that was probably intended to look friendly but instead just looks sinister. Sam wonders if this offer was part of the demon's plan all along or if he came up with it just now, when he saw Sam's eyes. "I have business in Hell's Kitchen," the demon continues, "and I don't want you messing it up. So I'm giving you the option of freedom."
"Freedom from what, exactly?" Sam asks. "From you?" He shakes his head as much as he can—he's quite literally frozen to the spot, and he can barely even keep the demon in his field of view. "I'll pass."

"Freedom from all of us." The demon says. "I wasn't present for your... I'll call it a christening for lack of a better word. But I'm fully aware of what you can do. More aware than you, it seems. I'm giving you the opportunity to leave Hell's Kitchen, to not interfere with what I'm doing here. In exchange, I'll grant you a second chance. The police will not be able to find you, as long as you don't intentionally seek them out that is. And I'll make sure that my fellow demons have no idea you were ever here."

Sam has to admit, the offer is tempting. Isn't a second chance exactly what he wants? And pretty much the only thing that could actually guarantee him safety from the demons is another demon. The only problem is, Sam is pretty sure this isn't just an ordinary demon.

"You aren't just a demon," Sam says, shaking his head in disbelief. He should have realized it sooner. "You're the Demon." The black-eyed man looks surprised by Sam's words and a little uncomfortable, only confirming Sam's suspicions. When an ordinary demon encounters a hunter, especially a hunter as well-known in Hell as Sam, they tend to turn tail and run. They have the ability to restart pretty much anywhere on the planet, far away from hunters and Winchesters alike. They have no need to stay and fight, they can just disappear. But this demon is unusually concerned with Hell's Kitchen. He specifically said that he's doing something here. What exactly that is, Sam isn't sure, but he knows it can't be good.

And he knows that he can't just let the Demon keep on doing it.

"What happens if I refuse to leave?" Sam asks, and that stupid smirk reappears on the Demon's face.

"Well, I'll just have to make sure you stay out of my way." He says.

"And how are you planning on doing that?" Sam challenges. There's not really much the Demon can do other than killing Sam. Dean is in prison, the rest of Sam's family is either dead or in the wind, and there isn't anything in Hell's Kitchen that Sam is particularly tied to—his refusal to speak to or interact with anyone unless absolutely necessary helped in that respect. However, the Demon seems to have a different opinion.

And unfortunately for Sam, his is a little more accurate.

"By persuading you." The Demon says in a tone that suggests that he prefers a more sinister definition of the word persuasion. "You've only been out and about in Hell's Kitchen for two weeks, but I've noticed that you've made quite a few friends. If you won't cooperate with me, I guess I'll just take my frustrations out on them."

"Friends?" Sam asks skeptically. Sure, he's met a few people, but he wouldn't exactly consider any of them friends. But Sam and the Demon both know that a person doesn't necessarily have to be Sam's friend for him to want to protect them.

The Demon has apparently been following Sam since he stepped foot in Hell's Kitchen, because he knows every single person who Sam has interacted with since he arrived.

"Daredevil, of course. And Miss Claire Temple, the nurse. Oh, and maybe the beautiful Karen Page." The Demon taunts. "In fact, why don't I go one step further? Unlike you, Sam, I know exactly who's hiding under that red mask. If you don't leave New York in the dust, I won't just kill
your friends. I'll kill their friends. Daredevil has a few people he holds near and dear to his heart, I believe. And Miss Temple's mother is quite the sweetheart." Sam grimaces, picturing the nurse who took Sam into her home and helped him even after learning his identity.

Sam can't let anyone else get hurt because of him. But he can't let the Demon take over Hell's Kitchen, either.

"You don't have to decide right now, of course. It's a lot to consider." The Demon says. He almost sounds bored, as if he's discussing a business deal rather than the lives of several innocent people. "I've got other business to attend to, so I'm going to be out of town for a while. How about this? You have two weeks to leave town. If you're still here by then, I'll know you've made your decision."

"You can't scare me away that easily," Sam says, biting his cheek. The Demon drops his hand and steps back, and Sam climbs to his feet. He knows better than to attack right now. The Demon can have an army here in the snap of a finger, and Sam can't take on one demon, much less fifty. He needs time. He needs training.

He needs Daredevil.

"Oh, you want me to scare you?" The Demon asks. "How about those abilities of yours? You know where they came from, don't you?" Sam doesn't reply, but he does gnaw on the inside of his cheek, thankful for the scarf that hides his nervous tic from the Demon. Truth be told, Sam isn't totally sure what gave him his powers. He knows it was the demons, he knows it was their blood, but he doesn't know how. He's taken demon blood before, drank it, used it, but it never did this. It was never this permanent.

"Yes." Sam lies, and the Demon nods, his expression suggesting that he already knows the truth.

"Those demons who took you, they injected their blood right into your heart." He says, answering Sam's unspoken question. "When you drank the blood before, it faded away because it wasn't in your bloodstream. It was in your stomach, and sure, some of it was absorbed, but that was just temporary. This time, they cut out the middleman. The blood running through your veins right now? That's all demon. Your blood isn't yours anymore, Sam, it's theirs. It's his." The Demon doesn't have to say a name for Sam to know exactly who he's talking about. There's only one demon who could have given Sam his yellow eyes.

"I can deal with demon blood," Sam says, ignoring the voice in his head that claims otherwise. He has to be sure. He has to act like everything is okay, like he's still remotely human.

Sam is still human. He has to be.

"Sure you can." The Demon replies. "For now. But how long until those dark thoughts start piling up? How long until you let them take over? How long until those yellow eyes become permanent?"

"They won't," Sam says, wishing he felt as confident as he sounds.

"You've been poisoned, Sam," the Demon says, "and every time you use those new abilities of yours, that poison worms itself deeper into your soul. Eventually, you're going to lose yourself in all that power. All that blood." The Demon grins, cocking his head to the side and listening. Sam listens as well, and after a second he picks up on faint sirens in the distance. Teresa McPherson called the police, and the police are on their way. Sam can't be here when they arrive or he'll be in jail before he can say his own name.
Luckily, the Demon appears to feel the same way.

"You're walking a thin line, Sam." The Demon warns, taking another step back. "The more you use these abilities, the closer you get to losing control of that monster you keep chained up in the back of your mind. Are you really willing to risk that darkness?" The Demon disappears without another word and Sam stands frozen, staring down the empty alley. After a minute, he leans over, picking up the discarded demon knife and tucking it into his belt. Who knows when he might need that kind of weapon.

The sirens grow louder and Sam turns, running down the alley. He's running from Will McPherson's body and Teresa McPherson's tears and the police, but he's also running from the Demon's words, the Demon's warning. The last time Sam had demon blood running through his veins, he almost lost himself to it. That ever-present darkness inside him almost took over. Is he really willing to use these powers for good if it runs the risk of making him evil? And how much is too much?

How far can Sam push himself before he goes darkside?
Chapter 11

Yellow eyes glow in the light of several flickering street lamps as Sam jogs down the sidewalk, attempting to follow Daredevil's winding rooftop path from below. The vigilante decided several days ago that Sam's abandoned building in the warehouse district was deserted enough to use for training, but Sam wasn't expecting him to utilize the entire block. Although to be fair, Sam wasn't sure what to expect at all when he called Daredevil three nights ago and asked for training.

He definitely wasn't expecting for there to be this much running.

It makes sense, of course. Everything Daredevil has done these past few days has made sense. Sam can't take to the rooftops like Daredevil can, his rudimentary prosthesis won't allow for that. And that same prosthesis also hinders Sam's mobility on the ground, and his fighting. Sam can't just take off the prosthesis, though. It's a part of him now. He'd be even worse off without it. So if Sam is going to get back in shape, get into crimefighting, he has to learn how to do it with a metal leg. And before he can learn how to fight, he has to learn how to run.

Despite Daredevil's apparent lack of superpowers—although Claire's reference to Sam being another one suggests otherwise, Sam has yet to see any evidence of the vigilante actually doing anything outside of the realms of human capabilities—he is surprisingly adept at training. Sam not only to control but to harness his abilities, to use them to his advantage in ways Sam would never have considered on his own. And Daredevil is also good at training in general, using his unique skill set and environment to combine several lessons into one, often making the drills themselves so convoluted that it takes Sam half of the night just to figure out what it is he's being taught. Take the exercise they're doing right now, for instance. Sam is running down the street, following Daredevil as he leaps from building to building. Sam is practicing running with his prosthesis, but he's also being forced to use his new night vision to track Daredevil's path on the rooftops. And even though the Demon's warnings about Sam's abilities are still at the forefront of his mind, Sam has to admit that training his powers really is helping. He's already able to control his yellow vision more easily; the white glow that signifies a human being—or other creature—has become more defined, and the range at which he can see the glowing figures has expanded dramatically. Even though Daredevil made sure that there was no one within a block of the area of the warehouse district he dubbed the 'training zone', Sam can still see the glow of several people in a building two streets over.

"Sam." Daredevil's gravelly voice pulls Sam from his thoughts and he looks up to see the vigilante standing before him, arms crossed.

"Daredevil," Sam replies awkwardly, acknowledging that he stopped paying attention to the task at hand, distracted by his internal monologue.

"You did well tonight." Daredevil says, smiling a little. "I'd like for you to take a walk with me, if you're feeling up to it." Sam nods, biting his cheek. He's thankful that the costume he accidentally created for himself covers his mouth, because the last thing he needs while fighting bad guys—humans and demons alike—is for them to see his nervous tic.

Daredevil turns around and starts walking and Sam trails behind him, adjusting his mask and ignoring the knot in his stomach as he wishes, not for the first time, that he had access to more protective clothing. The jeans and black jacket that currently make up Sam's uniform offer about the same level of security as his multi-layered hunter's clothes, but even though most people would consider werewolves and vampires to be more dangerous than the gangs of Hell's Kitchen, Sam is inclined to disagree.
Unlike gang members, werewolves aren't usually too big on guns.

Sam doesn't know where Daredevil is taking him until they arrive at their destination, and even then he isn't entirely sure what's going on. Daredevil opens the door to what looks like a garage and ushers Sam into a workshop, filled with a variety of tools. Some Sam recognizes from Bobby's repair shop, but the majority are devices that he's never seen before and can only guess at the application of. Daredevil continues forward through the garage and Sam hesitantly follows, stopping as soon as Daredevil does and watching as the vigilante tilts his head to one side, listening for something. Sam looks around, yellow eyes sweeping across the room and stopping on a white figure who is currently crouched behind a cabinet.

"There's someone there," Sam whispers to Daredevil, who nods.

"I know." He says, straightening and taking another step forward. "Melvin. It's me." Sam watches as the figure stands, stepping out from behind the cabinet and nodding to Daredevil.

"But not just you." He points out guardedly. Daredevil angles his head in Sam's direction and Sam steps forward, standing beside Daredevil.

"This is my friend." Daredevil says, and Sam frowns. He's not sure how he feels about being considered a friend to a vigilante he doesn't even know the name of, although Daredevil's words do lighten his mood considerably. "The one I told you about?" Melvin nods vigorously, obviously remembering an earlier conversation.

"Right, of course!" Melvin exclaims, moving over to the workbench. "I just finished the jacket. Bulletproof, of course. Same goes for the mask. No pants, though, didn't have time."

"That's all right." Daredevil replies. "I did give you a relatively short window."

"What's going on?" Sam asks as Daredevil crosses the room, heading for Melvin's workbench. Melvin takes a piece of cloth off of the table, offering it to Daredevil. The vigilante removes one glove and shoves it in a pocket, then accepts the fabric, running his fingers over it.

"Melvin here is the one who made my suit." Daredevil explains after a minute, using his gloved hand to gesture to his apparel while the other continues to examine the material. "After I gave you that bag of clothes, I came here and asked him to make some bulletproof alternatives. This is yours, unless you'd prefer to keep wearing a scarf." Sam smiles, shaking his head, and Daredevil holds out the piece of cloth. Sam shuffles over to the workbench, taking the cloth and holding it up to the light as his yellow vision melts away.

The cloth is pure black, somehow blacker than the scarf Sam is currently wearing. It's made of a lightweight fabric and it's smooth. The overall feel of the material makes it seem like the cloth should be sheer and thin. But when Sam pulls on the two ends, the cloth resists. It's extremely durable, thicker than the scarf and even his jacket. And even as Sam pulls the material as far as he can, it remains completely opaque.

"Daredevil told me you like tying up your mask," Melvin explains, "so I made this one a bit more malleable than his. The jacket is a bit stiffer than the mask, but it's also more protective." He picks up something else from the table, holding it up. The black jacket unfurls and Sam steps closer, gripping the new mask tightly as he examines the jacket.

It looks like an ordinary jacket at first glance, in the same way that the mask looks like an ordinary scarf. It has a zipper up the middle and two pockets, one on each side. But the inside tells a different story. The interior of the jacket is covered in the same material as the mask, layered
several times over, and there are several pockets sewn into the fabric as well, offering secure places for Sam to stash his burner phone, wallet, and any other odds and ends he may need in the field. When Melvin holds the jacket out to Sam, gesturing for him to put it on, Sam shoves the mask into the back pocket of his jeans and sheds Daredevil's leather jacket, pulling on the replacement and marveling at its fit.

Despite the fact that Melvin has never met Sam before, he somehow managed to make a jacket in the perfect size.

"This is incredible," Sam says, pulling off his scarf and tying the new mask around his head instead. He returns his vision to the yellow hue of his alter ego and finds a smile forming on his face. The jacket is light but sturdy, and Sam can feel the extra protection. And the mask, despite being thicker, is more breathable than the scarf, to the point that Sam can draw a full breath uninhibited. It's like it isn't even there.

The ensemble is the perfect combination of safety and practicality, and Sam is pretty sure that he's found his official crime-fighting costume—thanks, of course, to Daredevil.

"Thank you," Sam finds himself saying, and Melvin smiles, nodding. "Both of you."

"You have the ability to save lives, Sam." Daredevil says, smiling as well. "Are you up to the challenge?"

"Of course," Sam says, feeling for the first time in years like he could take on the world.

Two days later, Sam discovers that his answer to Daredevil's question wasn't entirely correct. It turns out, the world is fully prepared to fight back.

Sam and Daredevil are running another exercise in the training zone when Sam notices that there are white figures in the same building as there were two days ago, standing in roughly the same place—which is odd, considering Sam knows that that building is another abandoned warehouse. It's a trivial detail, probably nothing, but Sam's instincts scream that there's no such thing as a coincidence, and he learned a long time ago to trust his instincts. So rather than ignore the figures, Sam waves a hand, cutting the drill short as he heads down the street.

To Sam's surprise, Daredevil follows him down the road, silently observing as Sam turns two corners and jogs down several blocks. It isn't until the men have reached the building that the vigilante even says a word, and still then it's only to ask what Sam's plan of action is.

"I, uh, just want to figure out what's going on in there," Sam explains, face heating up. Even though he's relatively certain that he and Daredevil are around the same age, Sam can't help but view the vigilante as a sort of authority figure—like a mentor, a teacher. And every time Sam is forced to explain himself to Daredevil, he finds himself just as embarrassed as he was whenever he got in trouble in elementary school.

Daredevil, however, either doesn't notice or doesn't mind Sam's apprehension, because he simply waits quietly for Sam to continue.

"I saw the same people who are in this building right now two days ago. In the same building." Sam explains. Daredevil nods, accepting the explanation without dispute. Confused, Sam bites his cheek, shifting awkwardly. Is Daredevil not going to say anything? Comment? Offer some sort of direction or advice?

"Take point, Sam." Daredevil says, grinning—he's obviously taken note of Sam's discomfort.
"Figure out a way to get the information you need." Sam comes to the realization that Daredevil is, once again, using the world as his playground. It's not that the vigilante doesn't care about what's going on inside the building—in fact, it's quite the opposite.

Daredevil is turning this into another lesson. Sam just has to figure out what he's supposed to learn. Nodding, Sam turns toward the wall and focuses his attention on the glowing figures. From this close, he can now see that there are seven of them, six relatively large men and a smaller woman. The men are standing in a circle around the woman, who appears to be sitting down on the floor. But despite his proximity, the walls of the building are too thick. Sam can't hear a thing. He needs to figure out how to listen in on the conversation without alerting the building's occupants to his presence.

Recalling the several times in the past few weeks when he's found his senses overwhelmed, Sam wonders if he can force his hearing to strengthen. Straining his ears, Sam attempts to make out at least part of the conversation.

One of the men steps forward, and a glowing hand connects with a glowing face.

Sam sees red and suddenly he can hear the pounding of nine hearts, all beating at various speeds. The two fastest he discerns to be his own and that of the woman, while the slowest—and therefore calmest—is, unsurprisingly, Daredevil's. Sam can also hear a siren that he knows isn't anywhere within the boundaries of the warehouse district, and a TV set playing static. He can hear Daredevil's even breathing and the wind passing between the buildings and a pair of dogs barking at each other, and he can hear every word that's being said in the building before him, whether the speakers want to be heard or not.

"You brought this on yourself, bitch!" One of the men yells, and the woman chokes back a sob, her heart skipping a beat. "Boys, you know what to do." Sam looks around frantically, trying to find the door to the building as the six figures converge on the woman. One of the men grabs the girl by the hair, forcing her to her feet.

"They're going to hurt her," Sam says desperately, and Daredevil nods, wordlessly pointing to his left. Sam follows the vigilante's finger and spots a metal door that's almost completely obscured by boxes. Sam runs for the door and Daredevil follows, helping Sam push the boxes out of the way of the door. As Sam grabs the handle, one of the men inside strikes the girl again, sending her sprawling to the floor.

The door doesn't move an inch, even though the handle spins freely. It's either locked or rusted shut.

Sam doesn't have time for either option.

"Please! Help me!" The woman begs, and the men all laugh.

"Ain't nobody coming to help you." One man teases, and Sam's vision suddenly gets very bright. He throws his shoulder into the door as hard as he can, watching through the metal as the woman is hit once again, this time on the arm.

The sound of shrieking metal fills Sam's ears as the door is torn from its hinges, crashing to the floor.

Sam shoves his disbelief aside and runs into the building, watching as two of the men grab the woman's arms.
"Who the hell are you?" The man who threw the first punch asks, and Sam grins.

"No one." He replies, and the man laughs.

"Oh, really? You look like a cowboy." The man teases. One of the others lunges at Sam and Sam grabs him by the arm, swinging him around roughly and releasing him without warning. Sam is so pissed that he doesn't really care when the man flies across the room, slamming into the far wall with a resounding crack. He is a bit surprised at the force of the throw, but he knows better than to show it.

"He's no one you want to mess with." Daredevil says, dropping down behind the five waiting men and taking out the two holding the woman before either of them can turn their heads. The remaining three look wildly between Daredevil and Sam, unsure of who they should be more afraid of.

"Go. Get out of here." Sam urges the woman, who hesitates and turns to Daredevil. Sam ignores the way his throat tightens at the motion. Despite everything he's trying to do, trying to improve, the wrong people are still afraid of him.

The right people, Sam notes with a hint of satisfaction when he sees the discomfort on the faces of the three men, do at least seem to be somewhat apprehensive.

"You can trust him." Daredevil says without hesitation. "He's a friend, and he's right. You need to get somewhere safe and call the police." The woman nods, darting past Sam and out the door. Sam's tense muscles relax slightly when he realizes that the woman could have gone through the door behind Daredevil and avoided Sam entirely. The two men Daredevil took down climb unsteadily to their feet as Daredevil traverses the room to stand beside Sam, his arms crossed. "You should leave, too," Daredevil says to the men, "before one of us does something we all regret." Sam assumes that the 'us' in that warning was him and Daredevil, but the growing smirk on the central man's face suggests that he believes otherwise.

"And miss the chance to take out not one, but two vigilantes? No way." The man who threw the first punch—Sam suspects that he's the boss of this little group—laughs, pulling out a gun. Sam tenses but Daredevil doesn't react, other than to cock his head to the side again. Sam has gotten used to the motion, although he isn't entirely sure of its purpose. In most people, a tilted head means they're listening for something, but Sam has noticed in the past that Castiel—and several other angels—slants his head to imply confusion.

The four unarmed men share a look and Sam holds his ground, trying to decide what will result in the least amount of casualties: fighting, talking the guy down, or just running away. None of those situations seem favorable. Sam's new super strength can be useful in many situations, but this is not one of them.

Muscle is no match for a gun.

As it turns out, Sam doesn't even have time to make a decision before the gun is going off.

As a silver bullet speeds toward Sam and Daredevil, the world around Sam seems to slow down. He sees the bullet in the air, watches at it gets closer and closer to its intended target: Daredevil, or, more specifically, Daredevil's stomach.

Daredevil said that Sam's jacket and mask were made out of the same material as his suit. He and Melvin both said that the suit is bulletproof.
Sam isn't willing to take the chance that it isn't.

Acting on instinct and a little bit of hope, Sam throws up his right hand, palm out. Time speeds back up again and six hearts skip a beat simultaneously as Daredevil and the five men all stare at something hidden from Sam's view by his own hand. Confused, Sam drops his arm to his side, looking for whatever it was that gave the rest of the room pause.

Sam catches a glimpse of the silver bullet just as it falls straight down out of the air, bouncing off of the concrete floor.

Sam stopped a bullet with his hand. From across the room.

Sam stopped a bullet with his mind.

Without hesitation, the five burly men turn and bolt out of the building.
Chapter 12

When Sam finds himself staring down the barrels of seven guns held by seven angry men in ski masks, he's forced to remember that this was entirely his own idea.

It's been five days since Sam discovered his telekinesis, and he's managed to avoid using it ever since. The Demon's warning has haunted Sam ever since that night in the alley behind the McPherson's house, and the pure anger that washed over Sam in the moments leading up to his telekinetic outburst has dissuaded him from using his ability in the following days. Now there's less than a week left until the Demon's deadline and, terrified of what he can do, Sam is seriously considering taking the monster up on his offer. Of course, that fear hasn't stopped Sam from doing what he can to stop crime in the city. Which is how he ended up caught in the middle of an attempted robbery in the first place.

Sam's online hacking class, it turns out, is a good resource for finding crimes before they happen. Several of Sam's classmates consider themselves 'ethical hackers', and their breaches into the computer systems of various criminal organizations have helped Sam—and by extension, Daredevil—take down three different drug bosses in as many days. The majority of Sam's crime-fighting has been at Daredevil's side, with the experienced vigilante using every illegal activity as a new lesson. Daredevil didn't dispute Sam's decision to avoid his telekinesis—Sam was surprised by this but wasn't willing to question why exactly the vigilante made that decision—choosing only to warn that, in the heat of the moment, the ability could come in handy.

But today's crime, posted on a discussion board by a classmate of Sam's who managed to hack into the phone of a low-level boss in the Demon's circle, is well out of Sam's comfort zone—not that he's had the time to develop much of a comfort zone when it comes to vigilanteism. Unlike the Demon's previous activity, this heist is going down in the middle of the day, which means that Daredevil—who spends his daylight hours at his day job, whatever that may be—can't offer his assistance. For the first time since Daredevil started training Sam, Sam is on his own. The entire operation depends on him, from beginning to end, and he can only pray that he's ready.

As he tears his eyes away from the nearest assault rifle and looks instead into the dark eyes of the man holding it, Sam fervently hopes that his jacket is as bulletproof as Melvin claimed.

"Get the goods, I'll deal with this one." One of the masked men—the one directly in front of Sam, who of course happens to be the largest—says, shifting so that he's standing between Sam and the nearest door. The other six peel off, heading for the people crouched on the floor in the vicinity—the only reason that this attack took place during the day is that the Demon decided to rob the attendees at some kind of convention, although his exact target is still up in the air. Sam watches hopelessly as one young woman is dragged to her feet, unsure if he's more scared of the assault rifle the man carries or the idea of being injured enough to warrant a trip to the hospital and then a formal identification.

Sam's fears delay him momentarily, but the resounding snap of a gun against the woman's cheek is enough to make him disregard his anxiety-ridden instincts, at least for the time being.

Sam tackles the man who designated himself as the guard to the floor, knocking him unconscious with one well-aimed punch. The other six men are, unfortunately, quick to react, and within about fifteen seconds there are six guns pointed at Sam. Fully aware that he doesn't really have time to plan, Sam grabs the unconscious man's gun, bending it in half with his gloved hands. The action was entirely meant as an intimidation technique, and Sam smirks behind his mask as the six burly men exchange looks that Sam can only describe as timid.
"Call the police," Sam orders the vendor hiding behind a table to his right, who immediately reaches for his pocket. Sam steps forward, helping the young woman to her feet. One of the robbers lifts his gun, firing three times, and Sam's yellow eyes flicker as he throws up his hand. The bullets stop in mid-air about halfway from their target—the man chose to aim for the woman, not Sam, a realization that only serves to make Sam angrier—hanging frozen like silver raindrops until Sam allows his arm to fall to his side. Then they fall as one, hitting the tile floor of the convention center with one loud clang. None of the bullets bounce, and the sudden silence appears to unnerving the gunmen further.

The six unlucky robbers exchange another round of nervous looks and then one turns, attempting to bolt past Sam. This spurs on his co-conspirators and the six flee at once, all heading for the door behind Sam rather than the one at the opposite end of the hall—a misstep that costs them dearly. Sam leaves the young woman's side and knocks out three more robbers, and as the remaining three run for the door, sirens fill the air.

Within sixty seconds, all seven men are in handcuffs, and less than a minute later the last unconscious robber has been dragged out of the convention center and loaded into the back of a waiting police cruiser.

The remaining police force enters the building, singling out the least shaken of the witnesses and taking statements. A pair of misguided cops head right for Sam with their guns raised and he immediately puts his hands in the air, cursing his own stupidity. Sam was so eager to stop the Demon's daytime attack that he didn't consider the extra problems that crime-fighting in full daylight can lead to—faster police response time, no cover of darkness, and a whole lot of eyewitnesses.

"He saved us." The young woman says to the cops, stepping in front of Sam almost protectively. "Those men were trying to rob us and he stopped them. He saved my life." Sam smiles gratefully when the cops both lower their weapons. The younger man in the duo looks a bit confused, but his partner just looks annoyed—Sam figures it's safe to assume that the elder officer has seen his fair share of vigilantes.

"Sir!" An older woman yells as the elder cop prepares to respond, elbowing her way between the pair of officers and coming to a stop in front of Sam. She's clutching a microphone like a lifeline, so Sam isn't surprised when a cameraman emerges from the growing crowd a moment later. "Are you the man who has been seen working alongside Daredevil several times over the past month?" The microphone is shoved in Sam's face but he simply nods, smiling weakly. He can't allow his real voice to be broadcast, or the police will be at his door in seconds. But those cops aren't going to let him make a quick escape, so he's going to have to think fast.

Is it worse to be interrogated by a cop or a reporter?

"Sir!" A young man runs up, also holding a microphone, and two more cameramen follow. The elder cop shakes his head and backs away, pulling his partner with him, and the young woman sends Sam a sympathetic smile as the crowd around him grows. Soon, she's lost in the sea of reporters, her soft pleas drowned out by the journalists clamoring for a statement from 'Manhattan's Savior'.

Another reason for Daredevil's absence from this endeavor is the fact that the convention center is well outside of the bounds of Hell's Kitchen. Sam did briefly wonder if the benefits outweighed the risks. At the time of his decision, the answer seemed obvious, but now, swarmed by journalists, Sam is starting to wonder.

He got himself into this mess, unfortunately, which means he has to be the one to get himself out of
"Sir, do you have a name?" One woman asks, practically shouting the question in order to be heard over the others. A lot of the reporters must think that the subject is a good one, because suddenly the question is being repeated over and over, all of the reporters yelling and screaming in the hopes that Sam will pay attention to them rather than their opponents. This creates a sort of echo effect and the question begins to bounce around inside of Sam's mind, screaming in his ears over and over again in the same way that the words from his nightmares repeat throughout the day.

His head begins to ache and his ears begin to burn, and as Sam is overwhelmed by noise, his yellow eyes flash, effectively silencing everyone around him.

"You're walking a thin line, Sam." The Demon's voice rings in Sam's ears in the absence of the reporters' voices, and Sam frowns.

"What's your name?" The first reporter asks curiously, her voice so quiet that if not for his enhanced hearing, Sam wouldn't have heard it at all. She doesn't say anything more, but neither does anyone else, and soon the only sound in the immediate area is the clicking of cameras. Sam finds himself momentarily distracted by the soft sound of the shutters as picture after picture is snapped, ready to be sent to editors and printed in every newspaper in the city tomorrow morning, to be seen by every person in Manhattan and probably the world. Sam is about to become a true vigilante, one that the people know by sight, one that some trust and others fight to imprison.

While hunting, Sam learned that when you visit the same place twice, no matter how far apart the visits, someone is sure to remember you. While on the run from the FBI, Sam learned that anyone can be an enemy. In both situations, he learned that in pretty much any circumstance, the suspicious citizen will look the other way the second you tell them a different name.

Several voices echo in Sam's mind, vying for his attention, but it's the voice of the 911 operator—the one that Sam spoke to the first time he put on a mask, that night in the alley that feels so long ago now—that draws his attention. She was the first person to ever call him a vigilante, the first person to ever ask him 'who are you?'. Sam told her that he was someone else, someone new. And he is. Sam Winchester is gone, destroyed by the bombing of Lebanon, Kansas and the torture he endured in the four months that followed. This Sam, the Sam standing in a convention center wearing a mask and yellow eyes, this Sam is someone else. Someone new.

The first time Sam designed a new identity for himself in Hell's Kitchen, he didn't allow himself to think. He didn't choose, he didn't consider, he just closed his eyes and wrote down the first thing that he thought. Now, surrounded by reporters and offered the opportunity to create another new beginning, Sam does the same thing. He closes his eyes and smiles and says the first word that comes to his mind, since the very beginning of this new life, since the day he met Daredevil in a dark alley wearing nothing but a dirty t-shirt and a pair of sweats. Sam doesn't think, he doesn't choose, he doesn't consider. He just closes his eyes, opens his mind, and gives himself a name.

"Darkside," Sam says as the Demon and the 911 operator and Daredevil all scream in his ears. "My name is Darkside." His own internal voices also scream at him, arguing that he can never use his powers for good because they—and he—are destined for evil.

"Darkside." The reporter repeats as all of Sam's fears and doubts, old and new, echo in his mind.

The journalists clamor for more, yelling Sam's new name, Sam's new identity, asking him what he can do and how he can do it and why he's doing it. They ask him when and why and how he came to New York, when and why and how he started working with Daredevil. But Sam doesn't mind
these questions, doesn't mind as the volume rises once again. This time, no one is asking questions that Sam doesn't know how to answer.

Now, no one is asking who he is.

And as the voices mix together, forming an ocean of sound that threatens to drown Sam in a never-ending chant of 'Darkside, Darkside', one voice breaks through them all.

"Thank you, Darkside." The young woman says, and Sam smiles softly.

"Darkside, you're going to have to come with us." The two cops from before are shoving their way through the masses, guns drawn. Sam hopes it's only a precaution but he knows better than to believe it.

"Run, Darkside." The young woman urges, and Sam's smile widens. He can throw a werewolf across a room. He can bend a gun in half with his bare hands. He can stop bullets in mid-air and see people through walls. Who's to say that he doesn't have one more demonic ability up his sleeve?

Sam closes his eyes, picturing the abandoned warehouse that has become his home. He sees the black bag filled with clothes, sees the white t-shirts and the blue jeans and the cheap faux leather wallet and the silver laptop that is worth more than anything he's ever owned.

And the cops yell and the reporters scream and the cameras click and above it all, like a raft floating on the water, the young woman whispers. "Thank you, Darkside." And Sam focuses his mind on a rusted metal crutch, discarded in the corner of a dirty concrete room.

And then Sam's ears ring as all of the sounds cut off at once. And then Sam opens his eyes and looks around.

And Sam finds himself standing in an abandoned warehouse in Hell's Kitchen, miles away from the convention center filled with screaming reporters and yelling cops and whispering women.

And Sam ignores the fear building in the pit of his stomach, ignores the yellow eyes that haunt his nightmares, ignores the darkness running through his blood. Today isn't the day for Sam to be scared, to run, to hide. Today is a day for him to celebrate, to remember, to cherish. Today is the day that Sam became someone else. Someone new.

Today is the day that Sam Winchester died. Today is the day that Darkside was born.
Chapter 13

On the last night before the Demon's deal ends, Sam Winchester leaves Manhattan.

He doesn't go far, exactly—certainly not as far as the Demon probably intended—and he also doesn't leave with the intent to stay gone. Sam fully plans to return to Manhattan, to Hell's Kitchen. He didn't need two weeks to decide. He didn't even need one.

Sam knew the second he called Daredevil that he was going to stay.

So when he leaves Manhattan on that last night, Sam isn't leaving for good. He's simply heading to Queens to salt and burn the bones of a little girl named Barbara Perkins.

After the fiasco with the reporters at the convention center—and Sam's subsequent teleportation—Daredevil pretty much barred Sam from training for a few days. He cited the fact that, as a newly named vigilante, Sam would be thrust into the public eye, which means reporters and cops alike would be roaming the streets, trying to catch a glimpse of Manhattan's latest hero. Sam protested at first, of course, but he was quickly forced to agree with Daredevil—seven different police cars drove down his usually quiet street in the warehouse district on the first night alone.

So, trapped in the abandoned warehouse, Sam turned to his favorite pastime: research. And on his first day of (ware)house arrest, Sam found Barbara Perkins.

Barbara was a little blonde girl who was born in a small house in Queens in 1930 and died in the same house in 1942. According to the autopsy reports Sam was able to find online—thank god for the fact that the NYPD is big on digitizing their records—Barbara was a pretty sickly child, constantly in and out of the hospital. She died of an accidental drowning, or so the reports say. Accidental drowning victims don't often come back as vengeful spirits, so Sam is inclined to believe that the feeble little girl's death was anything but an unfortunate incident.

Sam hates the idea of disturbing the grave of a 12-year-old, but unfortunately, he doesn't have much of a choice. Barbara has been killing women in her old home for quite a while. Seven different families have lived in the home in the past 50 years, and of the five who had young daughters, only one left completely unscathed. The other four all moved out after the family matriarch died in an accident—an accident that always, interestingly enough, involved water. It didn't take long for Sam to connect the drownings to Barbara Perkins, and now, two days later, he's on his way to the currently unoccupied Perkins house in Queens. Because, of course, the graveyard where Barbara was buried is pretty much in the backyard.

When Sam gets to the Perkins house at around 10 at night, he's unsurprised to find the remains of police tape on the front gate of the cemetery. The most recent death—the one that caught Sam's attention in the first place—took place only a week and a half ago, and despite being ruled an accident, the police still conducted a small investigation.

The graveyard is old, full of moss and vines and crumbling tombstones, and reminiscent of a horror movie or a particularly detailed front yard on Halloween night. The cemetery was closed in 1945 and no one has really tended to it since, so it takes Sam twenty minutes of attempting to decipher the names on the dilapidated grave markers that scatter the cemetery to locate the area where Barbara Perkins was buried. And to make matters worse, as soon as Sam finds the right tombstone, his flashlight begins to flicker, eventually dying and leaving him completely in the dark.

Sam curses quietly and blinks, watching as the world lights up again, this time in a bright shade of
yellow. A strong gust of wind whistles through the graveyard and Sam shivers, the cold unusually discomforting. Memories of another cemetery invade Sam's mind and he pulls his mask up higher, breathing heavily. Sam shakes his head, forcing his mind away from the cold and onto the task at hand. Now isn't the time for a breakdown.

With a heavy sigh, Sam picks up his shovel and starts digging.

Two hours have passed by the time Sam's shovel hits the lid of Barbara's coffin. The impact of metal on wood makes a deep thunk and Sam almost jumps, the sudden noise in the otherwise silent cemetery catching him off guard. His face flushes at the thought—he's digging up a grave at midnight to kill a ghost, and he got scared by a shovel—and he bites the inside of his cheek, pushing back images of other less quiet cemeteries. Sam easily breaks through the saturated wood of the modest coffin with the tip of his shovel, pushing it to the sides of the muddle hole he's created. He tosses the shovel out of the grave then climbs out after it, grabbing his bag and pulling out a couple small packages of lighter fluid and the largest bag of salt he could buy for $2.50 at the only 7-11 between Hell's Kitchen and Queens. Sam pours out the salt and gasoline and flicks his Zippo lighter, ready to get the hard part over with but finding himself hesitant to actually finish the job.

He can't help but compare the decomposed body in the grave to the little girl he's seen in so many pictures over the last couple of days.

"Leave me alone!" A small voice screams from Sam's left, and he's thrown backward without warning. The lighter flies from his hand and the flame is extinguished as soon as it his the dewy grass. Sam looks up to see a young girl in a pink dress standing before him, her blue eyes dark and filled with anger. The girl's face is deathly pale and her hair and clothes are soaking wet, dripping water onto the ground beneath her. But what cements Sam to the ground is the dim white glow coming off of the little girl. It's bright, brighter than the luminosity of the Demon, but not nearly as bright as the auras of human beings. The light of a human is so radiant that Sam can't make out features, while the light of the Demon—and most other demons, Sam figures—is so dim that Sam barely noticed it at all. The glow coming off of Barbara Perkins falls somewhere in between, and Sam begins to wonder if what he assumed was some kind of rudimentary heat vision is actually anything but.

After all, ghosts don't give off any heat.

"I'm sorry about what happened to you," Sam says, raising his hands in an attempt to placate the little girl. "Barbara, I just want to help you."

"No one wants to help me!" Barbara yells, disappearing into thin air. Sam spins around just as Barbara rematerializes behind him, shoving him as hard as she can. Sam is thrust backward once again and he slams into Barbara's gravestone with enough force to snap his spine in two. Luckily, the stone crumbles to dust on impact and Sam falls onto his back instead. When he tries to stand, he immediately falls again, unable to hold his balance. Barbara begins to make her way back to Sam and he looks downward, discovering in horror that his prosthetic has twisted at the knee, turning the bottom half 180 degrees around and pointing his right foot in the opposite direction of his left. Since Sam is wearing jeans and boots, it gives the appearance that Sam's right leg has been completely broken. Luckily, metal legs don't include pain receptors, but unfortunately for Sam, a broken prosthetic is just as useless as a real broken leg would be. He glances to the side as Barbara starts getting closer, spotting the blue lighter in the grass way too far away for Sam to reach.

And then Barbara is upon him once again, her eyes red with rage as she reaches out, attempting to wrap her arms around Sam's neck. Sam scuttles backward as the spirit approaches him, and he
watches in dismay as her form becomes more potent. Ghosts only solidify when they're going in for the kill.

Suddenly, Barbara shrieks in pain, stopping in her tracks. Sam watches in disbelief as the little girl's body is enveloped in fire, her outstretched hand frozen inches from his face. The graveyard brightens, lit by the ironic fiery ends of a girl who originally met her ends in the water. Sam finds himself watching solemnly as Barbara dissolves into the air, crying out one last time as she disappears. After he's certain that the ghost is gone, Sam turns to the grave, unsurprised to find it alight. The fire is large, harsh and grating to Sam's sensitive vision, but there's a softer light within it, a white glow.

Sam watches in disbelief as the formless glow lifts into the air. For a moment, it seems to pause, and Sam swears that he sees a little girl's face smiling at him just before the shining white light continues upward. It disappears into the sky in the same way that Bobby Singer's soul did when Sam released him from Hell. And Sam realizes that he's never been seeing people's heat signatures. He's been seeing their souls.

"Dude, you're a terrible hunter." A familiar voice says, pulling Sam sharply from his realization. Sam turns, eyes widening in surprise when he sees Claire Novak standing beside the grave, holding Sam's blue lighter in her hand. Sam sits up slowly, smiling weakly under his mask as Claire walks over, offering him the lighter. It's a peace offering, Sam realizes, from one hunter to another. Claire's way of telling Sam that she isn't here for a fight, and also her way of inadvertently confirming that she has no idea that Sam is, well, Sam.

"Sorry," Sam says, dimly aware that his voice deepened automatically. He takes the lighter and shoves it into one of his pockets, looking around for something to help him get to his feet. Claire doesn't offer her hand, crossing her arms instead.

"You're lucky we both picked the same night to salt and burn Barbara Perkins." Claire comments. "If I hadn't shown up, you'd be a ghost right about now." She smirks and Sam feels a warmth growing in his chest at the familiarity. A warmth that quickly dies away at Claire's next words. "Who are you, anyway? I saw you on the news the other day, but you were being a superhero then. Stopping a robbery and chatting to some reporters. Definitely not a hunter."

"I can't be both?" Sam replies, wondering if Claire has been looking for him over the past five months. A lump begins to form in Sam's throat as he realizes that, more likely than not, Claire thinks Sam is gone. Dead. After all, if most of the world thinks Sam Winchester died in the Lebanon bombing, it stands to reason that hunters would feel the same way. Sam did go missing immediately after the explosion, and Winchesters aren't the type to just disappear—especially when their brother has just been arrested.

"Not successfully, apparently," Claire says, eyes narrowing. "You've got yellow eyes." She points out, an edge growing in her tone. "I think we both know that that's kind of suspicious."

"I'm not a demon, Claire," Sam says, swallowing hard. He knows it looks bad, a hunter with yellow eyes, but he doubts identifying himself as Sam Winchester would make it any better. Especially since he's been MIA for the past five months.

"Who are you?" Claire asks more forcefully, the doubt in her voice only building.

"I'm not a demon," Sam repeats, returning his eyes to normal and pulling down his mask before he can change his mind. "Just a Winchester." Claire's eyes widen and she stiffens, hand twitching toward her gun. "It's me, Claire, I swear."
"Where have you been?" Claire asks skeptically. "How do I know you aren't a shapeshifter, or a Leviathan, or possessed?"

"A shapeshifter wouldn't have yellow eyes. The Leviathan are all dead. And if I was possessed, I wouldn't be lying on the ground right now." Sam nods to his seemingly-broken leg and Claire nods, clenching her jaw. "It's complicated." Sam bites his cheek, debating if he should tell Claire the truth, and if so, how much.

Sam isn't sure how human he really is. The Demon seems to think that he's more monster than human, and Sam isn't sure if he's willing to risk his life to tell Claire what happened. He doesn't know how defined Claire's terms of 'monster' are, and he doesn't want to find out the hard way that he's on the wrong side of that line.

"I need to test you," Claire says after a minute, pulling a silver knife out of her belt. Sam submits to the test, aware that it's the only way to gain Claire's trust. Sam rolls up his sleeve, offering Claire his arm and allowing her to make a shallow cut in his arm. He winces a little at the sting then wraps his mask around the wound when Claire nods, satisfied. The second thing she takes out is holy water. Sam reaches for it, ready to take a gulp, but Claire seems to have other ideas. With a shrug and a small smirk, she opens the flask, tossing the contents in Sam's face.

Sam can't tell if he or Claire is more surprised when his face starts to burn.
Chapter 14

Sam frantically rubs his face with his hands, trying in vain to get the holy water off. The pain is not terrible by any means, certainly not the worst thing he's felt in the past five months, much less in his entire life, but what paralyzes Sam is the striking similarity between the searing pain of the holy water and the fiery torture he suffered at Lucifer's hands for so many years in the Cage. It isn't the pain that hurts, but the memories the pain brings to the surface.

Despite Sam's unsteadiness in the past month, despite the thoroughness with which the demons broke his body and mind, nothing they did to him could ever hold a candle to the torture he endured in Hell.

The burning has long since subsided by the time Sam is able to fully pull himself from darkest corners of his mind. As he shakes his head, shaking off his daze in the same way as he would unconsciousness, he looks up. Claire is pointing an angel blade at his throat, her gaze as hard and as cold as ice.

"Claire, please, I'm not a demon," Sam says, his voice shaking as his mind tries to convince him otherwise. The holy water burned him. Like he was a monster. Like he was a demon. Claire's eyebrows furrow and Sam sees a glint of red in her eyes. She doesn't believe him. Why would she? He reacted to the holy water like a demon would. There's enough blood in Sam's veins to fool a demon test.

The Demon's warning echoes in Sam's ears and he winces.

"You lying asshole." Claire seethes, hands shaking with anger. "Get out of him, you bastard!"

"Claire, it's me, I swear," Sam begs, but his pleas fall on deaf ears. He's failed the only test that never fails. There's nothing he can do to convince Claire of his innocence now.

"Prove it," Claire replies. "Or this angel blade goes through your heart." Sam hesitates, trying to figure out if there are any other tests Claire can perform that don't require an angel blade. She could draw a devil's trap and Sam could walk through it. Of course, there's no guarantee that he would actually be able to escape.

But the thought does give Sam another idea.

"Exorcise me." He says, jaw tightening. "If I really was possessed, you would kill me in the process of killing the demon. Try to exorcise me, and if it fails, you'll know I'm telling the truth. If it works, then you've saved me anyway." Claire angles her head to the side, considering Sam's proposition. It's logical, Sam figures, to try an exorcism. Safer for the meatsuit in any case, and much safer for Sam than Claire stabbing him with an angel blade.

"Not all demons can be exorcised." Claire points out after a minute. "Definitely not the yellow-eyed ones. Like you."

"Claire, I'm not a demon," Sam repeats, growing desperate. "I... I'm just mostly one."

"You're not exactly helping your case," Claire says, sounding slightly bored. There's only one way for Sam to convince Claire of the truth, he realizes. And that's to tell her the whole truth.

"I disappeared right after the Lebanon bombing, right?" Sam asks, and Claire nods hesitantly. "Dean is in prison. I just found out. I had no idea." Claire is about to reply when her phone
suddenly goes off, her ringtone—*Wheel in the Sky* by Kansas, Sam notes—echoing off of the nearby grave markers. Claire continues to hold the point of the angel blade against Sam's chest with her left hand as she answers the phone with her right, her face relaxing slightly into an expression of relief.

"Jody, thank god. I've got a problem." Claire interrupts the muffled voice on the other line, pausing as the voice starts back up again almost immediately. Sam's heart rate picks up as an image of the seasoned sheriff forms in his mind. Jody has more experience than Claire with the supernatural, although not by much. But Jody is also much more forgiving. Maybe she can help Sam convince Claire that he's innocent. He just has to convince Jody first. "Remember how I came to New York with you to hunt a ghost named Barbara Perkins?" Claire continues once the other line quiets.

"Well, someone else beat me to it."

"Who?" Jody asks, her voice muddled but clear enough for Sam to understand. He isn't sure if his ability to hear Jody's voice is due to his enhanced hearing or the volume on Claire's phone, but he doesn't care either way. Jody's voice is like a drug, washing over Sam in a wave and relaxing his muscles, decompressing his mind. Jody is someone Sam knows, someone he trusts. He hasn't heard a voice like that in months. He had no idea how desperately he was for that comfort until now.

"Sam Winchester," Claire says, and Sam doesn't need enhanced hearing to understand Jody's next words. She's yelling, although whether it's in excitement or anger Sam can't tell. "It's not that simple, Jody." Claire cuts the sheriff off. "His eyes were yellow when I found him, and holy water burned him."

"So he's possessed?" Jody asks, and this time, Sam can clearly hear the disappointment in her tone.

"Claims he isn't. Told me to exorcise him to prove it." Claire explains. "But I don't want to accidentally kill Sam if he is possessed."

"If he'll come willingly, take him to the motel," Jody says. "I'll meet you there."

"And if he won't?" Claire asks, sending Sam a warning look.

"Take him anyway."

"I'll come," Sam says, looking up at Claire and trying to convey how much he means it. "I swear on my brother's life that I'll come with you, no trouble." Claire pauses, considering. After a minute, she nods, sheathing her angel blade.

"We're on our way," Claire says to Jody, ending the call without another word and shoving her phone into her pocket. Then she turns, walking away, and Sam frowns. After a second, Claire turns back around, crossing her arms. "Well?" She asks impatiently. Sam hesitates, then sighs, taking out his pocket knife and slicing through the right leg of his jeans. He cuts the material off at the knee, and Claire watches in shock as Sam tosses the denim to the side, exposing the tangled metal limb hidden beneath. "What the hell?" Claire mutters as Sam grabs the lower part of the leg, twisting it sharply. The metal foot rotates back into place as the knee strains, not quite fixing itself but not quite as broken as before, either. Sam climbs somewhat unsteadily to his feet, offering Claire a shy smile.

"I'll explain everything once we get to Jody." He promises, taking a shaky step forward. The prosthetic is on its last legs, creaking with every step and definitely in imminent danger of snapping in two. Claire watches Sam struggle for a minute then groans, walking over to him and draping his arm over her shoulders.
"Come on, Sasquatch. Let's go." Claire says, trying as hard as she can to keep her face devoid of emotion. Aware of this, Sam doesn't comment on the small smile that finds its way to Claire's face when they successfully arrive at her car five minutes later.

After fifteen minutes of driving, Claire pulls into the parking lot of a slightly seedy—but definitely better than what Sam and Dean used to frequent—motel. She parks outside of room 22A and climbs out of the car, rounding it and helping Sam to his feet. While the ride was spent in a somewhat uncomfortable silence, Claire doesn't seem as unsure of Sam's loyalties as she was before—Sam isn't sure if it was the prosthetic that did it, or his willingness to come with her. The door to the nearest room opens before Claire and Sam have even made it up the curb, and Sam looks up to see the silhouette of a familiar figure in the doorway that quickly disappears into the room. As Sam and Claire enter the room, Jody Mills watches silently from the kitchen table, her arms crossed as she scans Sam's form—and stiffens noticeably when her eyes fall on his metal leg.

"Not a demon, then?" Jody guesses, and Claire shrugs. Jody stands as Sam and Claire cross the kitchen area, entering the bedroom. Both girls relax noticeably when Sam reaches the bed and sits down, and when he looks up he realizes that it's because there's a devil's trap painted on the ceiling above the kitchen. Sam walked right through it and didn't even notice.

The thought is more reassuring than he cares to admit.

"Still not sure," Claire admits, sitting down on the empty bed to Sam's right. Jody leans against the barrier between the kitchenette and the beds, her arms still crossed. She's dressed out in full sheriff gear, so Sam figures she's probably here on business. Which means Claire tagged along, and just happened to show up at the grave earlier. Sam has had more lucky breaks in the past hour than he has in the past five months.

It's probably going to be downhill from here.

"Neither am I," Sam says, biting his cheek. Both girls turn at this, giving Sam nearly identical looks of uncertainty, and Sam sighs. "I disappeared after the bombing in Lebanon five months ago, right?" He repeats the question he asked Claire in the cemetery.

"We figured you had died," Jody admits. "Dean was arrested and you didn't try to break him out, didn't call. The bunker was empty, and Claire even stayed for a month in case you showed your face."

"I didn't die in the explosion, but I was injured," Sam says, nodding to his prosthetic. "That's what happened to my leg. The explosion tore it right off." He hesitates, chewing on the inside of his cheek. "I think." He adds after a minute.

"You think?" Claire repeats skeptically.

"I don't really know, to be honest," Sam says. "I got to Hell's Kitchen a month ago, but before that, I don't remember much. My last clear memory before mid-February is from October 2, before the bombing. I do know a few details, though. I lost my leg. Hit my head. Then got kidnapped by a bunch of demons, most likely led by Asmodeus." Jody and Claire both pale at this, obviously beginning to understand where Sam's story is headed. "I escaped after four months, found myself in Manhattan. Found out later that along the way, Asmodeus had given me quite a bit of demon blood. Injected it into me. And it stuck around and gave me abilities. Powers."

"The yellow eyes." Claire infers. "And the super strength and telekinesis and that teleportation thing you did at the convention center that got caught on camera. That new vigilante, Darkside,
"That's you, right?" Sam nods, smiling weakly.

"Figured I might as well make the best of what I got." He explains. "Daredevil, the vigilante from Hell's Kitchen, he found me the first night after I escaped. When I got injured fighting a drunk who was trying to assault a girl, Daredevil brought me to his nurse friend's apartment. She's the one who finally told me what happened, told me about the bombing and Dean's arrest and my new status as Public Enemy Number 1. That's when I found out."

"That's why the holy water burned you." Jody realizes. "Because of the demon blood." Sam nods, bowing his head as memories push against the backs of his eyes.

"Have you heard of the Demon?" He asks, changing the subject. He can't break down now, not in front of Jody in Claire.

"The guy wreaking havoc in Hell's Kitchen? Yeah, we've heard of him." Claire says.

"Well, he's an actual demon," Sam says. "I ran into him two weeks ago while I was hunting a werewolf in New Jersey. He knew who I was, knew what had happened to me. He said if I kept using my new abilities, they'd turn me evil. Turn me into a demon."

"Make you go darkside." Claire guesses, and Sam nods.

"He also gave me two weeks to leave Hell's Kitchen and never return." Sam continues. "He's got some kind of plan he's putting into motion here, and he doesn't want me getting in his way. The two weeks are up at midnight tonight."

"You aren't leaving, are you?" Jody asks, sounding almost worried.

"I wasn't going to, but now I'm not so sure," Sam admits. "I mean, as long as I stay put in Hell's Kitchen, Daredevil is going to keep pushing me to use my abilities, to learn how to control them. That means I'll be using them all the time. If I'm already being burned by holy water, how much longer can I possibly have before I go totally darkside?"

"You aren't turning into a demon, Sam, and you aren't going to," Jody says, crossing her arms again. "And we both know that even if you leave New York, you won't just stop using those powers of yours. You escaped from four months of torture and immediately turned around and became a superhero. If you leave, you won't stop. You'll just be a superhero somewhere else."

"If I stay, he's going to try to kill Daredevil and all of Daredevil's friends. And Claire, the nurse who helped me." Sam protests, although he isn't entirely sure why. He wants to stay, so why is he fighting so hard to leave?

"Then protect them," Jody says. "You and Daredevil can keep all of Manhattan safe if you work together. And you and I both know that you aren't going to let any demon, with or without a capital 'd', destroy a city full of innocent people. So figure out what he's doing, and keep him from doing it."

"Kick his ass, Sam," Claire says with a grin. "But call me first, so I can kick it, too."

"For now, just go back home," Jody says, wearing a soft smile. "Get some rest, get prepared. You're going to start a war the second you get back to Manhattan, so you might as well be ready for it.

"I don't think I'll ever be ready," Sam admits. "I can't fight a war. Not right now. I still can't walk on this leg, much less fight."
"You'll learn," Jody says. "You'll adapt. You'll have to." Sam stands, heading for the door. He needs to get back to Hell's Kitchen before midnight, before the Demon's grace period ends. He needs to get prepared.

"Sam, wait," Claire says, and Sam turns around to see the blonde hunter holding out a large gray duffel bag. She tosses it at Sam without warning and he barely manages to catch it, surprised and very confused.

"What is this?" Sam asks. The bag isn't very heavy, but it feels solid. Full.

"Supplies," Claire says, still wearing the same grin—but it's not mischievous anymore, it's reassuring. "You were trying to fight a ghost with nothing but a lighter and a bag of salt from a 7-11. I'm assuming that's because you have nothing else." Sam smiles gratefully, nodding. He waves to Jody and closes his eyes, picturing the abandoned warehouse in his mind.

When Sam opens his eyes again, he's back in the concrete room that has become his home.

Sam sits down, setting the duffel bag on the ground beside Daredevil's bag of gifts. He unzips the duffel and smiles, looking through the contents. The bag holds several more changes of clothes, two pistols, two bags of ammo—one labeled 'iron' and the other 'silver'—a shotgun with twelve rounds, half regular and half salt, a flask of holy water, a container of salt, a bottle of gasoline, and an angel blade.

Attached to the angel blade is a note on the motel's letterhead, scrawled hastily in Claire's neat handwriting. It has two cell phone numbers on it, one with Claire's name beside it and one with Jody's. Beneath the numbers is a small note that puts a smile on Sam's face, which is probably exactly what Claire intended when she wrote it.

You aren't a demon, Sam. You're a hero.
You can conquer your dark side.

-Claire
Chapter 15

Honestly, Sam should have known better than to expect that he was going to get to have one good day.

The morning after his meeting with Claire and Jody in Queens, Sam comes back to Manhattan with a spring in his step, ready to face anything the Demon could possibly throw at him. For the first time since he found himself in Hell's Kitchen, Sam has backup he knows he can trust.

Daredevil and Claire the nurse are dependable, sure, and they've definitely helped him extensively in the past month, but he still doesn't completely trust them. Of course, it's no fault of theirs. The only reason Sam doesn't trust Daredevil and Claire is that he doesn't think he can trust anyone anymore. The demons tore that away from him.

But Jody and Claire, they're old friends. Sam has gone through a lot with those two, and he knows that he can trust them with his life. And they're also hunters, which means they know every truth about Sam. Unlike Daredevil—who, despite his best efforts to mask his emotions, is clearly not very supportive of Sam's supposed past—Jody and Claire know for a fact that Sam is innocent of the Lebanon bombing. And that makes all the difference.

So when Sam gets back to Hell's Kitchen, he finds himself genuinely happy for the first time in five months. Of course, his good mood can't last forever, not with Sam's infamous Winchester luck. In fact, Sam's fortune only lasts until he boots up his laptop and finds himself staring at the top headline in Manhattan.

Spelled out in big, bolded letters is the phrase 'DARKSIDE WANTED FOR MURDER OF THREE'.

Sam has clicked on the link before he even fully registers the words.

Apparently, while Sam was in Queens, Darkside killed three high-profile criminals—all, interestingly enough, known enemies of the Demon. The murders were brutal, the bodies were displayed publicly, and the Demon was conveniently seen across town at the time of the murders, making Darkside the prime suspect. And so within seconds, Manhattan's newest celebrated vigilante became the most wanted man in the entire state of New York.

Sam is fully aware of the irony in the fact that the one who finally bumped Sam Winchester down to #2 on the list was his own alter ego.

As soon as Sam sees the story, he knows that it's time for him to pack up. Daredevil and Darkside have been seen one too many times in the warehouse district, so he figures it's only a matter of time before the block is swarming with cops. Sam shoves everything remotely valuable into the duffel bag and leaves the rest scattered on the floor, abandoning his abandoned warehouse without a second thought. With enough luck, any cops who stumble upon the collection of worn clothes and dirty blankets will assume they found the temporary home of a homeless man.

The voice in the back of Sam's mind is being annoyingly vocal about how the temporary home of a homeless man is exactly what the warehouse is.

Pushing that thought—and several others—down to worry about at another time, Sam takes one last look at the warehouse that he's called home for a month now. Sam is used to living in below-standard housing, having done it most of his life, so despite the dreary interior, the concrete room
easily became a place of warmth and security for Sam in the hardest month of his life.

He's really going to miss it, but he knows he can never return.

With a small sigh and a shake of his head, Sam scoops up his rusted metal crutch, thrusting it into his duffel bag and leaving the abandoned warehouse for the last time.

Sam spends an hour putting as much distance as he can between himself and the warehouse district, not entirely certain where he's going other than away. He can't leave Manhattan, of course—that will only give the Demon what he wants—but he can't stay on the streets forever, either. And he can't take to the roofs. His prosthetic, weak to begin with and greatly damaged by the altercation in the cemetery in Queens, is on the verge of breaking. It's barely able to hold Sam's weight as he stumbles down the road, trying his very best to look like a drunk—and probably succeeding a little more easily than he wants to.

Sam isn't sure where his feet are taking him until he finds himself standing in front of a vaguely familiar apartment complex—and even then, he's not sure why. He doesn't have time to properly examine the building before flashing lights turn the corner and he's forced to duck into an alley, crouching behind a dumpster as he waits for the police cruiser to pass. By the time it does, the hairs on the back of Sam's neck have alerted him to the presence of another person—he'd normally guess it was a human being, but he's not feeling that optimistic today. He spins around rapidly, muscles tensed, to find Daredevil leaning casually against the railing of the apartment building's fire escape, his dark red, horned cowl sticking out like a sore thumb against his navy blue dress pants and striped tie.

"Sam." Daredevil says with a small smirk, obviously enjoying that he managed to scare Sam. Sam is trying to figure out the odds that the two vigilantes managed to, out of all of the alleys in Manhattan, pick the same one to hide out in. By his—rough—estimation, Sam would have a better chance winning the lottery. Which means this is the single luckiest thing that has ever happened to him.

Needless to say, Sam is surprised to see the other vigilante. But he's also never been more relieved. If anyone knows how to help him with his current situation, it's Daredevil. After all, the odds are pretty high that the horned vigilante has been on the run right now.

"Are they after you, too?" Sam asks to clarify, and Daredevil nods.

"For 'questioning'," finger-quotes accompany Daredevil's words, "in relation to Darkside's murders of three major players in the arms trading business. An interesting accusation, considering Darkside wasn't even in Manhattan last night." Sam told Daredevil about his excursion to Queens before he left, explaining somewhat truthfully that there were a series of murders in the Queens area that he wanted to deal with. Daredevil had, predictably, protested, claiming that another hero would probably take care of it—Sam still hasn't shaken the entertaining mental image of Spider-Man trying to fight a ghost—but Sam had insisted, citing his need to take some baddies on alone and following that up with a claim that it would be simple and he could handle it on his own.

Sam hopes that Daredevil never finds out just how wrong he was about that.

"Unfortunately, crime-fighting isn't an airtight alibi." Sam comments. "What's your excuse?"

"Just as poor." Daredevil admits. "Good alibis are only available to those superheroes who have the
privilege of no secret identity. That applies to neither you nor I, unfortunately. "The vigilante pauses, angling his face not toward Sam's eyes but toward his mouth. "Put on your mask." Sam doesn't question the impromptu order, digging the reinforced cloth out of his bag and tying it over his mouth.

"So, what do we do?" Sam asks once he's done, crossing his arms uncomfortably. "The entire city of Manhattan is after us. I'm the single most wanted person in New York. I even beat out Sam Winchester for the top spot." Daredevil smiles a little bit at that, but the grin quickly dissolves back into a frown as he thinks.

"We'll have to find a way to prove your innocence, but unless Darkside was seen in Queens, there's really no way to convince the police that you didn't commit the murders." Daredevil decides, and Sam's eyes widen. What are the odds?

"I might be able to make that happen," Sam says, and Daredevil cocks his head to the side, sending Sam a funny look.

"How?" He asks. "You're pretty adept at avoiding sightings. If it wasn't for the robbery at the convention center, most of Manhattan wouldn't even know you exist."

"I actually ran into a couple of old friends while I was in Queens," Sam explains, quickly formulating a reasonable half-truth in his mind—after all, he can't just tell Daredevil he was burning the body of a 12-year-old ghost and happened to run into a teenager who was doing the same thing. "A woman who used to date my uncle"—Sam smirks slightly, wondering how pissed Jody would be if she heard him call her that—"and her daughter. They helped me out after my prosthetic got twisted up. Jody is a sheriff, so she'll be a credible enough source."

"And they know who you are?" Daredevil asks, the double meaning in his words apparent. Do they know Sam is Sam Winchester, or do they know Sam is Darkside? The answer to both questions is yes, so Sam nods.

"Jody and her daughter helped me out a lot after my dad died. They both recognized me pretty much immediately, even with the mask and the eyes." It's a white lie but one that Sam isn't too concerned about. He doubts that Daredevil and Jody will ever meet face-to-face, and even if they do, it's not like they'll be swapping stories.

"And she has your number?" Daredevil asks with skepticism in his voice, continuing the conversation that is quickly turning into an interrogation.

"She changes phones a lot and always puts me in under a pseudonym," Sam explains. "I promise that she's trustworthy."

"I believe you." Daredevil says, nodding. "Give her a call after we're done with this."

"Done with what?" Sam asks as Daredevil straightens, angling his head to the right. His ear is pointed toward the alley exit so Sam turns to look in the same direction, straining his ears—he's figured out by now that if Daredevil has any kind of superpowers, they must be tied to his senses, so it's possible Daredevil can hear something that Sam can't. Sam has just picked up on the sound of footsteps, barely a whisper compared to the loud city streets, when an African American man walks into the alley, staring right at Sam. Sam instinctively ducks his head as he blinks, watching the world turn yellow and thanking his lucky stars that he put on his mask when Daredevil told him to.

"Darkside." The man says, and Sam nods hesitantly. "And you brought your friend." Daredevil
steps forward, standing beside Sam and nodding to the man. The man looks the two vigilantes over, raising an eyebrow at Daredevil's suit but not commenting. Instead, he crosses his arms, waiting patiently.

"Detective Mahoney." Daredevil says in response to the man's greeting, and Sam winces. Of all of the people to walk into the alley, it had to be a plainclothes police officer. Winchester luck strikes again. However, Daredevil does seem to be familiar with this particular cop.

Sam isn't sure if that's a good thing or not.

"So, Darkside, you've been in Hell's Kitchen for less than a month and you've already managed to earn yourself the top spot on the vigilante watchlist. Congrats." Detective Mahoney says flatly, ignoring Daredevil entirely. "Any chance you'll listen when I tell you to get your ass out of Manhattan?"

"Not really," Sam admits awkwardly, face heating up. For the millionth time, Sam is extremely thankful that his vigilante costume includes a mask that covers his mouth. "That wasn't me, by the way," Sam adds quickly. "The murders, I mean. I wasn't even in Manhattan last night."

"Oh, really?" Mahoney asks skeptically. "Where were you then, Tahiti?"

"Queens," Sam says. "Stopping a robbery at a hotel. I'm sure the victim would be happy to verify." Sam figures that Daredevil knows he's lying—Sam did give him an entirely different story, other than the Queens part—but luckily, the other vigilante remains quiet.

"Do you happen to know this victim's name?" Mahoney asks.

"Unfortunately, I didn't stay for a chat," Sam says with a small smirk—on the contrary, staying for a chat is pretty much exactly what he did. "I can tell you that she was a sheriff, although from where I'm not certain. Had the badge on her nightstand."

"Well, I'll be sure to look into that," Mahoney says. "For now, why don't you two come with me?"

"Sorry, Mahoney. Another time." Daredevil says, an edge to his voice. He steps forward without warning and Mahoney pulls a gun from his waistband, pointing it at Daredevil so quickly Sam is pretty sure it's instinct.

"Woah, Brett, if I had known you were going to be this violent, I wouldn't have brought donuts!" An unfamiliar voice exclaims, and Sam watches in disbelief as yet another man enters the alley. This man is around Sam's age with blond hair about the same length as Sam's, but that's where the similarities end. The man is several inches shorter than Sam, a bit heavier, and definitely not a cop—or a vigilante, for that matter. So who is he?

"Franklin Nelson." Detective Mahoney says with a groan, answering Sam's unasked question. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I was going to ask if you and your friends wanted some snacks, but you're clearly busy," Nelson says, gesturing as he speaks. He has a coffee in each hand, two white paper bags tucked under his right arm, and a dark brown messenger bag draped over his left shoulder. He's also wearing a suit that looks strikingly similar to Daredevil's—not that business suits tend to have many variations. Still, Sam learned a long time ago that a coincidence is almost never just a coincidence, and the resemblance between Nelson's mannerisms and the lighter side of Daredevil that Sam occasionally gets to witness is obvious. Maybe this guy is a friend of the vigilante's?

"Let me guess," Mahoney says exasperatedly, "these two are your clients?" Sam stiffens as Nelson
gives him a once-over, not relaxing until the blond turns back to Mahoney, grinning.

"Of course, Brett! You know me, always helping the crazies." Nelson says enthusiastically, and Mahoney sighs.

"Whatever. I don't get paid enough, and now I've got some sheriff to find, anyway." He says, obviously irritated by Nelson's exuberance. "You're just as crazy as they are, Nelson." Detective Mahoney shakes his head, shoving his gun back into its holster and turning away from Sam and Daredevil. As Mahoney passes Nelson, the blond man holds out one of the paper bags. Mahoney pauses, takes the bag, and opens it, then he immediately sends Nelson a scowl. Shoving the bag under his arm, Mahoney leaves the alley. Nelson shrugs, walking over to the two vigilantes and offering one of the coffees to Daredevil.

"I didn't realize you and Darkside actually knew each other." Nelson comments, and Daredevil nods.

"We met about a month ago. He's stuck in Hell's Kitchen, has a target on his back, and I've been helping him lay low." The vigilante explains, taking a sip of his coffee. Nelson copies the motion and Sam waits silently for the two men to continue. He knew that Daredevil had several associates in Hell's Kitchen, of course, but this man simultaneously seems closer than a friend and more foreign than a stranger. The air around the two men is both comfortable and awkward. The duo is a paradox. Sam wonders if they had a falling out.

He has to admit, this probably isn't the best way for them to reconcile.

"Well, if Daredevil here trusts you, I'm going to assume that you didn't actually kill three people last night," Nelson says after a minute.

"I wasn't even in Manhattan last night," Sam replies.

"Well, this is nice and all, but we do have a major problem." Daredevil says, turning to Sam. "Darkside, we know this guy is obviously serious about whatever it is he's doing in Hell's Kitchen. If he's willing to kill three people just to send you a message, everyone you know is in danger."

"I don't know many people in Hell's Kitchen," Sam says. "But he isn't going after the people I know, Daredevil. He's going after the people you know." Nelson's face pales at this and he tugs uncomfortably at his shirt collar. Daredevil simply nods, biting his lip lightly.

"That's to be expected." He says carefully. "He can't go after your friends because you aren't in contact with the majority of them. But my friends are open targets. I'm assuming he's aware of my identity, then?" Sam nods, biting the inside of his cheek.

"He didn't tell it to me, but he implied that he knew. Mentioned Claire and her mom, and a reporter I met after I left Claire's apartment that day a month ago." Daredevil and Nelson both stiffen at this, exchanging a look Sam interprets as fearful.

"What was this reporter's name?" Daredevil asks, his voice going stone cold as he tries—and fails—to mask the unease building in his tone.

"Karen Page," Sam says, and Nelson bites his lip while Daredevil curses under his breath. Sam raises an eyebrow, assuming from their reactions that he didn't encounter just any reporter. "I'm assuming you know her?"

"Quite well," Nelson says. "Karen is a good friend."
"She's tough, too." Daredevil says. "Sam, Claire has found friends in vigilantes other than the two of us. I'll call a couple of them and get them to keep an eye on her. She'll be safe. And I'll stay with Foggy, make sure he's got around-the-clock protection." Sam infers that Foggy is Nelson's nickname, an assumption that Nelson confirms when he quickly protests against Daredevil's plan.

"I can defend myself, thank you very much!" He exclaims, crossing his arms. The white paper bag falls from his grasp, hitting the ground and spilling donut holes everywhere.

"Not from this guy." Daredevil says, smirking as Nelson scrambles to save the least dirty of the donuts. While Nelson attempts to salvage at least some of his snacks, Daredevil turns to Sam, the corners of his mouth tightening. "Can you keep track of Karen? She's tough, and she can fight, but I don't think she'll be able to hold her own against the Demon."

"The Demon is the guy you pissed off?" Nelson asks incredulously. "Oh man, this is gonna be a toughie."

"I've dealt with worse," Sam remarks. "The Demon is afraid of me, he made that clear when he tried to convince me to leave. I think I can beat him, I just need a little time."

"Well, time is the one thing we don't have." Daredevil points out, setting his coffee down on top of the dumpster to his right. He reaches out and grabs Nelson's messenger bag, ignoring the blond's protests and pulling out a stapled stack of papers and a ballpoint pen. Sam and Nelson both watch as Daredevil runs his fingers over the ink on the front page of the packet then flips it over, repeating the motion on the blank back side. Then, seemingly satisfied, he uncaps the pen with his teeth, scribbling something down and passing the papers to Sam. "Karen's home and work addresses." Daredevil explains, nodding to the packet. There are two street addresses written on the back, one that includes an apartment number and one with a floor number. Sam nods, committing the addresses to memory and handing the papers back to an irritated-looking Franklin Nelson, who takes the packet gratefully while sending Daredevil another glare.

"You really can't just take my case files." Nelson reprimands Daredevil, who just grins. "Some of this stuff is classified information."

"That case is for a parking ticket, Foggy." Daredevil points out, and the blond man groans.

"Shut up."

"What time does Miss Page get off work?" Sam asks uncomfortably, and Daredevil frowns.

"Five." Nelson supplies. Sam nods, heading for the alley entrance, but Nelson holds up a hand to stop him. "She'll be pissed if she figures out that Mr. Daredevil here assigned you as her bodyguard. She likes to think she can hold her own, which she can, most of the time. Fiery girl, she is." Sam bites the inside of his cheek as Nelson flushes, obviously uncomfortable. Sam figures that the man's embarrassment stems from his slip-up with Daredevil's name, but Sam doesn't comment. If Daredevil chooses to never reveal his identity to Sam, Sam won't mind. He understands not wanting a suspected serial killer to know your name. However, Nelson's mistake does pique Sam's curiosity. He knows now that Daredevil's name starts with an M, most likely M-a. Is he a Mark? A Mason? A Matt? None of the names really fit the crime-fighting, horn-wearing vigilante, but then again, Sam doesn't really know the man that well.

For now, Sam is content with knowing only the vigilante side of Daredevil. Or at least, he's trying to convince himself he is.

"She'll never even know I'm there," Sam assures Nelson, picking up his duffel bag and heading for
"Sam, be careful." Daredevil calls after him, and Sam finds a smile forming on his face.

"Always am." He replies as he turns, heading down the street.

As Sam walks, something tugs at the back of his mind, an image of a little girl screaming. It's a remnant from a nightmare, stuck in Sam's head despite his—and the world's—repeated attempts to replace it with more relevant fears. Whether the image is an anxiety or a memory Sam can't be sure. Whatever it is, it sends a tremor through him every time it returns to the forefront of his mind, pulling the ever-present knot in his stomach even tighter. Something is coming, something terrible. If the little girl isn't a memory, she's an omen of what's to come. Sam doesn't know what his nightmares have to do with his future. He doesn't know if he's facing the consequences of a past event or one that hasn't even happened yet.

All he knows is that whatever is coming is going to destroy his fragile world once and for all.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Surprise! For anyone who has been keeping up with this story (and whoever you are, I'd like to thank you for sticking around), I wanted to make this note to explain that due to school and life and some other things, I'm switching my updates from Tuesdays to Saturdays—I started posting in the middle of the summer, and school has come back to bite me in the ass, so Saturday updates make my life a little bit easier.

For anyone who read/cared about this note, thanks, and I hope you enjoy the chapter! :)

In the three days following Darkside's fall from grace, Sam manages to successfully find a routine. During the day, he tails Karen Page as she commutes to and from work, keeping an eye on her office from across the street. When he's not out fighting crime, he spends his nights on the roof of Page's apartment building with his laptop, studying for his law class. The class is a strange comfort to Sam, a memory of his life before—not just before Lebanon, but before angels, demons, and Leviathan. The last time Sam was studying for tests was also the last time he lived a truly normal life, the last time he was allowed to be human, to wake up from dreams of lollipops and candy canes instead of fire and yellow eyes. In the time since Stanford, Sam's life has been overturned several times, but the two worst changes—the two times his entire world did a 180—share a distinct similarity: yellow-eyed demons. Sam knows, logically, that his numerous misfortunes are about as much his fault as the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, but he can't help but wonder if, had he chosen differently at one of the several pivotal points in his life—going to Stanford, going with Dean after Jess's death, even choosing to stay in the bunker on October 5, 2017—he would be living a much happier life right now.

Directly opposing the comforting memories brought on by the law class, Sam's hacking class has begun to tie into his future. The studying required for Sam's second course is minimal—the teacher doesn't appear to be a big fan of homework or tests, so there isn't really much for Sam to do other than to scout local crime. Sam isn't actually entirely sure if the hacking class is legit, seeing as the instruction was supposed to begin two weeks ago and Sam hasn't received so much as a syllabus. He also has a sneaking suspicion that Henry Michaels is far from the only fake name on the class roster. But, sketchiness aside, the class—or at least, the students within—has become an important part of Sam's nighttime routine, especially now that Darkside is almost as hated by the NYPD as Sam Winchester. The course's discussion board, although void of actual assignments, is full of information on local crime, thanks to the self-proclaimed vigilante hackers who frequently post updates—although if they're actual members of the class or just invited themselves in, Sam can't be sure. The hackers supply Sam with low-level crimes to stop, police routes to avoid, and even, interestingly enough, intel on the Demon's gang. Sam isn't entirely sure how his classmate Andrew Smith—one of the other students Sam is fairly certain uses a pseudonym—gained access to the Demon's inner circle, or at least to the tech of a higher-up, but he also knows better than to look a gift horse in the mouth.

And if any of Sam's classmates—or not-so-legitimate discussion board members—have noticed that crimes reported on the board have a tendency of being stopped by Darkside, they've kept quiet.
But of course, Sam's comfortable routine can only last so long before his notorious Winchester luck strikes again. And when it does, it strikes hard.

At around midnight, almost exactly three days after the Demon's warning and Darkside's supposed murders, Sam teleports to the roof of Karen Page's apartment building after ending a drug trade across town—and finds the blonde woman waiting for him, her arms crossed and her expression hard.

"Oh, hello there," Sam says awkwardly, biting the inside of his cheek. He takes a step back, trying to form a picture in his mind—he doesn't care where he ends up, as long as it isn't here—but finds himself frozen to the spot by the intensity of Page's glare. "I wasn't aware that this roof was occupied." Sam rambles. "If you'll excuse me-"

"Cut the shit, Darkside." Page says impatiently, her expression shifting to one less angry and more reprimanding—it's strikingly similar to the look Sam has received from Mary Winchester every time he's done something stupid, which equates to roughly once a month. Sam frowns at the thought, wondering where Mary is right now. The past five months must have been pretty hard on her.

For the first time, Sam is struck by the feeling that something truly terrible happened was done to him at the hands of the demons. Obviously, he was tortured, and obviously, he was experimented on—his abilities are proof of that much—but now he has to deal with the idea that he wasn't just affected physically. He assumed his lack of memories surrounding the Lebanon bombing was due to a concussion or something, but what if it's more sinister? What if the demons wanted Sam to forget? What if they got inside of his head and took out the memories of the bombing?

And if they did, what were they trying to hide?

Just thinking about the possibilities makes Sam sick to his stomach. The demons messed Sam's mind up in a way that he never imagined they could. He knows he's missing memories about Lebanon and the demons, but Sam is missing more mundane memories as well, things that he shouldn't be forgetting—things like his mother and Castiel. The first thing Sam did when he escaped should have been finding his brother, his mother, his friends. But the idea of contacting someone never even crossed his mind. And, he realizes, neither did any kind of self-preservation. Sam has been in Hell's Kitchen for a month and he doesn't have a place to stay, money, or even a car. And those are all things he should have thought about a long time ago.

Sam is losing his mind, and he hasn't even noticed. Hasn't noticed the things he's forgetting, doesn't recognize when he remembers them. Pieces of his memories are drifting around in the back of his head and he can't even begin to figure out how to catch them. How is he supposed to save Manhattan if he can't even save himself?

"I know you've been tailing me." Page says, pulling Sam from his thoughts. He has to backtrack to remember what Page was even saying, and when he recalls her stern words, Sam shifts his weight stiffly, trying to decide if he should risk telling at least some of the truth.

Page's continually intensifying glare answers that question pretty quickly.

"I'm sorry about that, really." Sam finds himself saying, thankful that his mask hides his rapidly reddening cheeks. "It's just a precaution."

"Against what, exactly?" Page frowns. "Bad guys do have a tendency to go after the friends of superheroes, but last time I checked, you and I didn't know each other personally." The point is a valid one, of course, and it's entirely true. Unable to dispute, Sam remains quiet while Page
continues. "I don't even know who you are."

"Not many people do," Sam replies. "And that doesn't matter, because this guy isn't going after my friends. He's going after Daredevil's." If Sam had any doubt that Karen Page knew Daredevil personally, her reaction to his words confirms it. Page's face loses some color, but only for a second. Soon, it's turning red, and she mutters something under her breath that she probably assumes Sam can't hear. He can, of course—she said: "Damn you, Murdock."—but since the statement doesn't mean anything to Sam, and is probably a reference to Daredevil's identity, Sam decides to disregard it for the time being.

"And what did our dear friend do this time?" Page asks, her tone suggesting that she thinks she already knows the answer.

"Nothing," Sam admits, and Page's eyes widen. Whatever she was expecting, it certainly wasn't that. "This is all on me. I got to town a month ago and managed to get myself on the Demon's bad side. He's been trying for the past couple of weeks to get me out of Manhattan so I don't screw up whatever operation he's got going on here. Like you said, bad guys tend to go after superheroes' friends. Unfortunately, I haven't made any friends in Manhattan."

"You seem to be pretty chummy with the Devil of Hell's Kitchen." Page points out, and Sam shrugs halfheartedly. She's right, of course, and that's what Sam hates to admit—the Demon is only going after Daredevil's friends because the only friend Sam has made in the city is Daredevil himself.

"We aren't friends, I don't even know his name," Sam says, unsure if he's trying to convince Page or himself. "And the Demon can't really go after Daredevil anyway, not without raising some major red flags at the NYPD. Daredevil's a hero. Taking him out would put the Demon in the spotlight, and I'm pretty sure that's exactly what he's trying to avoid. But I'm the new guy in town. The police aren't sure what to think of me yet. The Demon could make me disappear and no one in Manhattan would bat an eye."

"So he tried to convince you nicely to leave, which obviously didn't work." Page says, probably trying to make sense of the extensive amount of information Sam just dropped on her. "He can't go after your friends because you don't have any in Manhattan, and leaving the city to go after anyone you know kind of defeats the purpose. So to get to you, he's going through Daredevil's friends."

"That's very kind of you, but I don't need a tail. I can take care of myself." Page says, and Sam can't help but smirk.

"You know, that's pretty much exactly what Daredevil and Nelson told me you'd say." He admits, and Page shakes her head. She's trying to keep her expression steady, but her poker face is terrible and Sam catches the corners of her mouth turning up ever so slightly.

"How much of a threat is the Demon, really?" Page asks after a minute. "And don't spout some bullshit about how he's dangerous, but you can handle him. Tell me the truth."
"He's dangerous, but I can handle him," Sam says, grin growing wider when Page quickly flips him off. "I mean it. The Demon is powerful, and he's probably got a lot of people in this city under his thumb, but he's scared of me. He's trying to scare me, trying to blackmail me into giving up, but he isn't trying to fight me or kill me. He knows I can beat him, so he's trying to take me down any other way he can."

"What can he do?" Page asks, tone beginning to shift from anger to curiosity. "Like, I've heard rumors, but I don't know anything concrete. No one does."

"I'm not totally sure, either," Sam admits. "I know that he can teleport, he has telekinesis, and he has super strength, but he might have other powers I don't know about." Page nods, processing the information then shifting her weight minutely and nodding again.

"And what about you? What can you do?" Page questions next. Sam figures that this is probably going to be her next exposé—she is a reporter, after all—but he has no qualms about answering the questions if it will convince Page to let him help protect her. That is, until he realizes that his answers are getting increasingly repetitive.

"I can teleport, I have telekinesis, and I have super strength, but I might have other powers I don't know about," Sam says uncomfortably, rubbing the back of his neck. Page's eyebrows rise so far that they disappear into her hairline, and she's quick to fix Sam with another glare. "It's true, okay?" Sam defends, raising his hands in mock surrender. "I don't know who exactly the Demon is, but I do know how he got his powers because I got mine the same way. I think that's why he's afraid of me. We've got the same abilities, but I'm more powerful. Like, uh, like Antman and Yellow Jacket." Sam pulls the example out of thin air—or, more specifically, out of whatever part of his mind keeps track of the non-supernatural-related but mildly interesting news articles he comes across—but Page seems to accept it. She relaxes slightly, leaning against the wall of the roof-access door as her glare softens.

"And you really think you can beat him?" Page asks, voice a little kinder. Sam wonders if there's a particular reason for her sudden change in tone. If there is, it's probably one hell of a story.

"I'm not sure," Sam admits, "but I know he thinks so. I'll be the first to admit that I'm nowhere near prepared. I'm new to the whole superpowers thing. Daredevil is helping me train and control my abilities, which is the only reason we're even associated at all. I think that, with time, I can definitely take him out. But while I take that time, I need to make sure that everyone the Demon is targeting is safe."

"And you don't know who he is." Page says. It's not a question but Sam nods anyway, shrugging at the same time.

"I have no clue, but I also have a feeling it could be the key to stopping him." The statement is slightly exaggerated but still true—while the identity of the Demon himself is unimportant, the identity of his meatsuit might actually be valuable information.

"Well, how about we make a deal?" Page suggests. "You want me safe, and I need some freedom. You need the Demon's identity, and I want him gone. I think I can figure out who the Demon is. I have field experience and several sources I can call. I'll get you his name. All I need you to do in return is to promise that you won't follow me around all day every day."

"You're in charge," Sam says, holding up his hands. "What do you suggest?"

"I work at the New York Bulletin." Page says. "I'll be perfectly safe there, we've got security guys
and I trust my coworkers with my life. And my apartment was villain-proofed last year by
Daredevil and Foggy. If anyone tries to break in and attack me here, they'll both know in a
heartbeat. So really, you only need to follow me to and from work." Sam refrains from mentioning
that, with his particular abilities, the Demon doesn't actually need to break in to get into Page's
apartment. He knows Page is smart, knows she thinks she can manage this. The Demon is a villain
on a whole other level than what she's used to, but Sam isn't willing to admit that. For Page,
accepting Sam's help at all is probably a huge sacrifice. Sam wants her to feel safe, and telling her
how much danger she's really in isn't going to help with that.

So instead of telling the truth, Sam decides to compromise.

"How about I keep an eye on your commute, and whenever I happen to be in the area at night, I'll
check on you at your apartment." Sam counters, fully intending to stick to crimes in the immediate
area regardless of Page's response. Page hesitates, then nods, holding out a hand. Sam shakes it
firmly and they both smile warmly. "Pleasure doing business with you," Sam says, dropping his
hand to his side as Page starts to dig through her purse. After a minute, she pulls out a business card
identical to the one she gave Sam a month ago—not that she knows that.

"If I'm going to be keeping you updated on the Demon's identity, I'll need to be able to contact
you." Page explains as she offers Sam the card. He takes it and shoves it into a random pocket,
unwilling to admit that he already has the number memorized.

"And you'll also have to be able to call if you get into trouble," Sam replies with a grin. Page juts
out her bottom lip in an exaggerated pout, then she gives Sam a dirty look.

"I think you and Foggy would get along." She comments. Her tone suggests that her words were
meant as an insult, but Sam knows better—he met Franklin Nelson three days ago and decided
pretty quickly that the quirky man would make a good friend.

"It was nice to meet you, Miss Page," Sam says, aware that he's overstayed his welcome. After a
second, he takes a step back to distance himself from Page—he's never tried to teleport with
another person before, and he definitely doesn't want this to be the way he finds out that physical
contact is the only requirement.

"Karen," Page says, and Sam pauses, raising an eyebrow. "Call me Karen." Sam nods, smiling
softly.

"It was nice to meet you, Karen." He corrects, closing his eyes. When he opens them again, he's
standing in the alley where he met Franklin Nelson three days ago. The duffel bag Claire Novak
gave him is hidden behind the dumpster, filled with everything Sam owns, none of which is truly
his.

Sam's clothes came from Claire the nurse and Claire Novak, his weapons from Jody, his
technology from Daredevil. His life and everything he has are gifts from friends Sam has had
forever and friends he's only just met. His life is changing, but Sam is starting to think that it may
be for the better.

In the past month, Sam has lost his home, made a new one, and lost it again. He's found new
people to trust and found that he couldn't let himself trust them. He's become the most wanted man
in America, left that life behind, and become that man again. He's gained new abilities, stopped
using them, and started again.

Five months ago, Sam Winchester died. One month ago, he decided to never come back. A week
ago, Darkside was born. Three days ago, he nearly died, too. But none of that matters right now.
Right now, Daredevil and Franklin Nelson are working to get Darkside back into the favor of the police. Right now, Claire Novak and Jody Mills are researching, finding ways to defeat the Demon. Right now, Karen Page is trying to figure out exactly who's hiding behind that name. Right now, Sam Winchester is preparing for the first fight in his life that he's truly looking forward to. Sam may not have his brother on his side, but he still isn't alone.

Sam has a goal now, a purpose, but he also has a team. Sam has died so many times in the past month, but it doesn't matter, not right now. Right now, thinking about all of the people he's found, all the people he's helping, all the people helping him, Sam doesn't care how many times he's died.

Sam has never felt more alive.
The walls are gray, Sam realizes, or at least they were once upon a time. He had never noticed before now, never spotted the patches of off-white hidden in the corners. He had never seen any sign of what once was because now, the concrete walls of the uniform square room are coated in red, most of the color dried but some still dripping, little streams of liquid adding to the layers of dark crimson on the walls until they reach the floor and end up in small pools so deep that they're closer to black than to red. The red isn't just on the walls though. It's everywhere. It's on the floor, the ceiling, the chair Sam is currently tied to. It's not an addition but a part of the room, not decor but substance, ingrained in the very foundation of the cell.

Sam fears that, should he remain here much longer, the red will become a part of him, too.

Sam's train of thought is interrupted when he hears the door open—they placed him facing the opposite wall so that he'd never know who, or what, was coming. They thought it would give them control over him, thought it would condition him to fear the sound of that door. But he memorized the sound of their footsteps weeks ago, learned how to tell apart each and every one of them. And when they tried to confuse him by taking new bodies, changing everything about themselves, he memorized their smells instead.

No matter how many bodies the demons switch between, they retain their own individual scents—all variations on the same theme of blood and death.

The demon who enters now is the only one who didn't change his vessel, the only one who still retains the same footsteps he began with, but Sam doesn't need that to identify him. The stench of this demon is overwhelming, more potent than the smell of the blood that coats the walls of his
prison. And so long before the demon steps around the chair, Sam knows exactly who it is.

The last yellow-eyed demon stands before Sam, wearing a white suit and a wicked smile and carrying a syringe filled with a liquid that matches the wet parts of the walls.

Neither man nor demon speaks, and Sam fights to keep his expression neutral as Asmodeus advances. Sam doesn't react when the demon blinks and his eyes swirl. Sam doesn't react when his captor grabs his shirt and tears it open like it's made of tissue paper. Sam doesn't react when the syringe is thrust downward, or even when the long, thick needle buries itself in his chest.

Sam doesn't react until Asmodeus forces the poison right into his heart. And by then, he doesn't have time to react. As soon as the blood hits Sam's veins, his mind begins to splinter.

The red-walled room and the yellow-eyed demon fade away, replaced by gray walls and a little girl. She can't be more than five years old, dressed in a pink dress that matches both her shoes and the ribbon in her hair. She opens her mouth and says something to Sam but no sound reaches his ears. Sam strains to hear her as she opens her mouth again, but this time something thick and red spills from her lips and she looks down at her own torso. Sam follows her gaze and watches as a red stain grows on her pink dress, and as the girl falls her shadow grows, edges hardening until there's a man standing there, a man in black clothes and a black mask holding a black gun. And then there's a flash of light and the entire scene turns yellow, other than the girl and the man. They're both white, both growing, the man bright and the girl growing dimmer by the second.

Sam sees the white and yellow world brighten, sees the girl's white light leave her body behind and sail into the sky. As soon as it disappears from Sam's view, the world brightens again, as if to compensate for the loss of the little girl's glow. And then, suddenly, all of his senses begin to function again, begin to overpower him, to overload him.

He hears her scream, hears the gun, hears a laugh. He feels a sharp pain in his chest, smells copper, tastes salt. Feels rage and fear and sorrow all at once, falls to his knees and cries out and hears the man's gun load and lifts his hand and twists his wrist and hears a snap and a thud and-

Sam Winchester shoots into a seated position, his breath heavy and his eyes wide. As his nightmare-memory washes over him, he looks around, trying to find anything he can to center himself, to convince himself that he isn't there. His shirt, though damp, is soaked with sweat, not blood, and despite the pains, a quick examination proves that his chest is perfectly intact. As he looks around, he sees no sign of a little girl in pink or a masked man in black or even a yellow-eyed demon in white. Instead, he finds himself lying among dumpsters and cardboard boxes. It's fitting, a dark part of Sam's mind supposes, that he's surrounded by trash. These are the rejected parts of ordinary people's lives, the abandoned things they either once deemed important or never cared about at all. He doesn't know which category he fits into, decides that it depends on the person.

Sam wonders how long he has until he ends up resting in one of these alleys permanently.

He also wonders why he woke up, what woke him. Sam is nothing if not a deep sleeper, a gift when he was a child sleeping in seedy motels but a curse as an adult when he found himself trapped in his nightmares. And while Sam's awakening is always sudden, it's never without cause, not when he's fallen that deeply into a memory. Not when it's a memory that sinister. No, something had to have woken him. So what was it?

The answer comes in the form of a ringtone as Sam's burner phone goes off in his pocket. He pulls out the phone and puts it up to his ear—unlike with the laptop, Daredevil didn't splurge on the phone, so it has no Caller ID—waiting for the person on the other line to announce themselves before he dares to say a word.
"Sam?" Jody Mills asks cautiously, and Sam finds himself releasing a breath he didn't even know he was holding. A kind voice is exactly what he needs to hear right now.

"Jody," Sam replies, his relief seeping into voice alongside his fatigue. "What's up?"

"I've called five times, are you alright?" Jody asks, concerned. Sam finds a smile forming on his face at the thought of Jody's genuine worry. There's at least one person out there who still cares about him.

The idea is a little bit more relieving than it probably should be.

"I was asleep," Sam admits. "Long night."

"Of course." Jody yields, evidently somewhat embarrassed according to her tone. Sam is way too exhausted to figure out why.

"So, what did you need?" Sam asks, changing the subject. "Or are you just calling to check in?"

"I actually was wondering if you'd go on a little road trip with me?" Jody admits, and Sam frowns. "Where to?" He asks cautiously, not sure if he should leave Manhattan, especially since he needs to keep an eye on Karen.

"Not too far. Barely even outside the city." Jody says. "After we spoke in Queens, I started asking around to see if anyone knew somebody who could help an amputee under the radar. There's a prosthetist on the hunters' payroll currently living just outside NYC, his daughter was saved from a rugaru about five years ago. I called him up and he agreed to fit you for a new leg, since yours looks like it's seen better days."

Sam looks down at his mismatched legs, recalling the number of times that his prosthetic has failed him in the past month.

"That... That sounds great, Jody." Sam says before he can change his mind. He pokes his head out into the street then gives Jody his approximate address, muttering a quick goodbye as he hangs up and climbs unsteadily to his feet. He picks up his blanket, shoving it into his duffel bag and slinging the bag over his shoulder. While Sam hates the idea of being homeless, he has to admit that moving from one alley to another is a surprisingly convenient lifestyle for a vigilante. He just has to make sure to stow the duffel somewhere safe when he goes out to fight, and he's fine. Living out of a single duffel bag wasn't a difficult transition since Sam lived the same way throughout most of his childhood, so the hardest thing for him was adjusting to the lack of a roof over his head. Even the worst motel rooms had those.

Shaking his head, Sam heads out of the alley, leaning against a street sign and waiting for Jody's arrival.

Five minutes later, a silver Toyota pulls up to the curb and Jody Mills steps out in full sheriff gear. Sam hefts his bag onto his shoulder and heads for the back of the car but Jody intercepts him, shaking her head and holding out a hand. When Sam doesn't move, she forcefully takes the duffel bag from him, nodding toward the front passenger seat.

"Sit." Jody orders and Sam smiles, climbing into the car as Jody loads his duffel into the trunk. Once she's done, Jody gets into the driver's seat and starts the car, fastening her seatbelt and looking expectantly at Sam.

Sam reaches for his own seatbelt then stiffens, suddenly aware of something that he had never considered until now.
"What is it?" Jody asks when Sam's hand drops into his lap and his eyes follow.

"I just..." Sam trails off, trying to figure out how to phrase his words in a way that makes sense. Because what he's feeling, it really doesn't make sense. "I just realized that I haven't been in a car in over five months." The emotions brought on by that simple realization are too strong, too real. It's not like Sam hasn't ridden the bus several times in the past month, after all. But somehow, that seems like a whole other world compared to the small car he's seated in now. Maybe it's the fact that there are more strangers on a bus, making it more impersonal. Sam doesn't know. And while five months without a car probably seems insignificant to most people, it's an insane idea to Sam. He's lived out of the Impala for most of his life, after all, so cars are something he always accepted as standard. An ever-present piece of his life. Being without one for so long is something Sam never thought he'd go through, which is weird enough, but what scares Sam the most is the fact that, until now, he didn't even notice.

Now that he's realized, though, Sam is really starting to miss the Impala.

Jody doesn't say a word in reply to Sam's revelation. Instead, she watches quietly as Sam gathers his thoughts and grabs his seatbelt, fastening it. Then she pulls away from the curb, her eyes glistening slightly.

For the first five or so minutes of the drive, neither Sam nor Jody breaks the silence. Sam wishes he could say that it's a comfortable silence but that isn't true—it seems that neither person in the car has any idea what to say to the other.

Sam, however, having grown scarily used to using conversation as a way to ward off the shadows that hide in his mind, can't bear the awkwardness of the situation, so he begins to search his mind for something to say. Luckily, he quickly recalls a stray thought he had a few days earlier that gives him an idea for a conversation starter.

"Jody, have you heard from my mom recently?" Sam asks quietly, biting the inside of his cheek. Jody turns, giving Sam a curious—and somewhat troubled—look.

"What do you mean?" She asks cautiously, and Sam frowns. Is this a conversation they've had before? Did Sam forget an entire discussion? Or did something happen to Mary that he doesn't know about—or remember?

"Like, uh, have you spoken to her? Seen her around?" Sam asks, growing more anxious by the second. Jody's frown deepens and her knuckles turn white as her grip on the steering wheel tightens.

"Sam, where do you think your mom is?" Jody asks.

"I don't know," Sam admits, and Jody relaxes slightly, only to immediately tense again when he continues. "She doesn't really tell Dean and me where she goes."

"Sam, do you remember Lucifer's child?" Jody asks, and Sam nods, raising an eyebrow.

"Jack." He corrects, confused. How does Jack relate to Mary? "He was..." Sam trails off, his eyes widening. "He was with Dean and I. Where did he go?"

"I don't know," Jody says, her tone suggesting that Sam isn't focusing on the right part of the discussion. "But you do remember the day he was born?" Sam nods, recalling the terror that rushed through him at the sight of Jack's fully adult form and glowing gold eyes.

"He was already an adult," Sam says, nodding again. "Mom and Cas were with us but I don't..." He
trails off again, forehead furrowing. "I don't remember where they went after that."

"They were killed, Sam," Jody says sympathetically. "You and Dean came to my house with Jack about two weeks after it happened. You told me that Castiel was killed by Lucifer, that Crowley was killed in another universe that Jack accidentally opened a portal to. You said that Mary and Lucifer were still trapped there. Dean seemed to have assumed that Mary was killed by Lucifer pretty much immediately." Jody pauses, frowning. "You guys told me all that months ago. You really don't remember?" Sam shakes his head, grinding his teeth against his cheek until he tastes blood.

He knew his memory loss applied to memories before the bombing, not just the memories of the demons—the three missing days from October 2 to October 5 are a testament to that—but he never even considered that the blank spaces could extend further back in time. Obviously, they do. Sam forgot his own mother's death, Crowley's death, Castiel's death, and he had no idea. What terrifies Sam is that he could be forgetting so much more, and he'd have no idea.

How much of Sam's own life is a mystery to him?

"Sam?" Jody asks, concern filling her voice. Sam shakes his head, forcing a smile.

"I'm okay." He says. It's a lie and they both know it. But Jody always seems to know when Sam has reached his limit so she doesn't push, doesn't press. Instead, she changes the subject entirely.

"Claire has decided to go to college," Jody says, her voice light, and Sam looks up in surprise.

"Really?" He asks. "I thought she was pushing you to let her hunt full-time." Jody nods, smiling wistfully.

"I almost wish she had stayed on that track now." She admits lightheartedly. "I had no idea how complicated college applications have gotten." Jody laughs and Sam smiles, nodding in agreement.

"What made her change her mind?" He asks, and Jody shrugs.

"I'm not entirely sure, to be honest." She says, frowning. "It happened after you and Dean told us about Castiel's passing, so that may have played a part, but like I said, I don't really know. Claire isn't exactly the most open with her feelings." Sam nods, agreeing with that sentiment as well.

"What does she want to major in?" He asks.

"At the moment, she's undecided," Jody says. "But I think she'll figure something out pretty quickly. I pushed her to go to school because I knew it would force her to extend her horizons, figure out who she is. She can't do that with Alex and I. She needs to be away from her family so she won't feel pressured to act a certain way around us, to fit into a mold and never try anything new." Sam nods, a lump forming in his throat as he considers Jody's words. She's right that Claire needs some time away from her family. Jody and Alex are great people, but Claire can't fully realize her potential with them hanging over her. Sam didn't really know who he was until he left Dean and his dad behind and went to Stanford. Alone for the first time in his life, Sam was forced to depend on himself, and he learned quite a bit about who he really was along the way.

Claire, obviously, spent a lot more of her childhood alone than Sam did, but the comparison still stands. Some time alone, away from the pressure of their families, will do Claire and Sam both some good.

Sam has already learned quite a bit about himself in the past month, and he's probably going to learn a lot more in the next month, and the one after that.
The conversation descends into silence, but this time, it isn't awkward. It's not the kind of quiet associated with two strangers sitting beside each other on a train, it's the kind of quiet that comes when best friends watch a show together, or a couple in love lie in bed side by side before going to sleep. It's the kind of quiet that Sam remembers from a decade ago, when he and Dean always had each other's backs and they thought they could take on the world without anyone else. It's the kind of quiet that happens when two brothers drive down a long stretch of road in Kansas, both feeling like the only thing that matters is the person sitting right beside them. Sam hasn't gotten to experience that kind of quiet in a long time. So now, now that he's been given the opportunity, Sam plans to grab it tight and never let it go.

So now, even though his mind is running wild with worries about the Demon and Karen Page and Mary and Jack, Sam doesn't say a word. Instead, he savors the familiar quiet of a car driving into the unknown.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 17:

Sam has another dream about the red-walled room, much more detailed than the last several. He remembers that the reason the walls are red is that they're coated in blood and that Asmodeus is the yellow-eyed demon who was torturing him. Asmodeus stabs him in the chest with a needle and Sam finds himself in another place. He watches a little girl in a pink dress get shot by a masked man. She dies and Sam snaps the man's neck, then wakes up to a call from Jody. She's taking him to see a doctor in order to get a new prosthetic leg. During the ride, Jody updates Sam on Claire's college plans and a few other (spoiler) things. The chapter ends about halfway through the ride when the conversation ends.

*A/N*

For anyone who had to skip the last chapter due to spoilers, I apologize for the inconvenience, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the story!

As soon as Jody and Sam arrive at the hospital—Sam still hasn't quite wrapped his head around the idea of any hunter having a legitimate contact in an actual hospital—they head straight for the back entrance. There's an African American man waiting for them at the door, and his scrubs and white coat tell Sam that this is the doctor he and Jody are meeting. Jody stops the car, rolling down her window and nodding to the doctor, who smiles.

"Sam, this is Dr. Leonard Johnson," Jody says. "Dr. Johnson, this is Sam." Dr. Johnson offers Sam a soft smile then angles his head toward the doorway behind him.

"Jody, you can park your car right there." He points to a row of three empty parking spaces. Jody pulls away and parks and she and Sam climb out of the car, following Dr. Johnson inside. They wind down a few strangely empty hallways and end up in an empty examination room, where Dr. Johnson gives Sam instructions to take off his jeans before disappearing into the hallway. Jody turns away as Sam pulls off his tattered jeans—despite everything that's going on, the only thought that crosses his mind is that these jeans came from Claire Novak and Sam has no idea where she got them—and then the pair sit quietly, neither one willing to be the first to look at Sam's leg.

The first person turns out to be Dr. Johnson, who, upon his return, takes one look at Sam's leg and shakes his head, humming softly.

"That's not what I expected." He admits, rubbing the back of his neck. Sam frowns, forcing himself to look down at his metal leg. Roughly half of the leg is rusted, and the knee is bent and twisted out of shape thanks to Sam's repeated falls, but that's not surprising. Sam was expecting all of that. What he wasn't expecting, however, is what he finds when his eyes move past the leg itself and toward the remains of his thigh. Then Sam finally sees what it was that surprised Dr. Johnson, and he starts to wonder how he didn't notice sooner.
Sam's thigh is covered in a thick web of deep scars that climbs up his thigh and disappears beneath his boxers. The ends closest to the prosthetic leg are bright red, some even bleeding lightly, but Sam can't feel it. And although it's shocking, the scars aren't even what surprises Sam the most. What he finds himself staring at is the place where metal meets flesh.

For the past month, Sam has been choosing to expressly ignore his metal leg, choosing to accept it for what it is and move on. The only times he even thinks about it are when it fails, when it malfunctions. He's also never seen a point to removing the prosthetic, figuring that it would be too much of a hassle, especially if he had to move quickly. And other than to today, the only time Sam has really taken the time to look at his entire right leg was the morning he spent at Claire Temple's apartment a month ago, and his mind was way too messed up for him to observe much of anything then—much less remember it.

Or at least, that's the explanation Sam gives himself for why he didn't realize that the prosthetic isn't removable.

The metal that makes up Sam's prosthetic leg doesn't just stop at his thigh, it continues upward, disappearing beneath his skin. The thin metal plates at the top of the prosthetic are probably digging into Sam's muscles, maybe even his bones, and he had no idea. Sam can't even begin to formulate a response so he just sits quietly, staring at the mass of metal that is even more a part of him than he originally realized.

"This... complicates... things." Dr. Johnson says somewhat awkwardly, and Sam nods, eyebrows furrowing.

"Can you remove it?" Jody asks curiously, and Dr. Johnson nods hesitantly.

"I'm confident that I can, but it will require surgery." He says. "In normal circumstances, I'd have to keep you for observation while we prepared, which could take upwards of two days. Of course, this is anything but normal. I'll see what I can do." The doctor pauses once again, eyeing Sam's leg and smiling weakly. "I would add that the procedure would likely be painful, but I don't foresee that being a problem."

"Why?" Sam finds himself asking. He still hasn't quite wrapped his head around the fact that the prosthetic leg is physically attached to him, and now Dr. Johnson is talking about surgery?

"There are metal plates quite literally attached to the severed muscles and nerves in your leg." Dr. Johnson explains. Sam looks down at his leg, at the metal that disappears beneath his skin and the scars that are still bleeding lightly, and starts to understand what the doctor is saying. "You should be in excruciating pain right now," Dr. Johnson continues, "but from what I understand, you didn't even know that your prosthetic leg was permanent." Sam nods, realization dawning as he recalls a small, seemingly insignificant detail from his fall outside the McPherson house that seems like it happened so long ago now. Sam remembers thinking that he was really lucky he couldn't feel any pain in his leg below about mid-thigh. But looking at his leg now, it's clear that the flesh and bone of his real leg extend well beyond mid-thigh and almost to the knee.

So why can't Sam feel anything halfway up his thigh?

"The nerves have most likely been interrupted." Dr. Johnson says, answering the question Sam never asked aloud. "Whoever amputated your leg likely cut off the nerve endings specifically to avoid that excruciating pain I mentioned earlier." The doctor nods to the web of scars, forehead creasing. "While some of those scars are natural, most likely a result of whatever event caused the need for amputation in the first place, the rest are very uniform, geometric. Whoever operated on you methodically cut into your leg in order to reach and destroy the nerves underneath. And while
that procedure must have been extremely painful, the result is a total lack of feeling, painful or otherwise, below the point of damage." Sam nods, mind whirring with the new information. There was no reason for the demons to have deadened the nerves in his leg—wasn't excruciating pain exactly what they were aiming for? Cutting the nerves off seems like it would have been counterintuitive.

Except that the process itself was painful, Sam realizes. The demons had to amputate Sam's leg after the Lebanon explosion, so they must have decided that severing the nerves would be a nice bonus. Dr. Johnson was wrong. Severing the nerves in Sam's leg wasn't a way to give Sam some relief. It was the demons' first round of torture.

"So can you remove it?" Sam asks, changing the subject. "The leg, I mean?" The more he thinks about the prosthetic—and all of the memories associated with it—the more he wants it gone. Sam lost a lot of things to the demons, but he gained a couple as well. If only one of them is truly permanent, Sam wants the other gone as fast as humanly possible.

"I can." Dr. Johnson says, smiling sympathetically. "I will, however, have to put you under in order to do the procedure. Is that okay?" Sam nods, turning to Jody, who smiles reassuringly.

"Let's do it," Sam says before he can change his mind. "Let's just get this over with." Dr. Johnson nods, turning toward the door then hesitating.

"I'll need to get a team prepared. They'll help me under the radar, won't tell a soul about you. But I need your permission." Sam exchanges a look with Jody, who nods, her gaze hard.

"That's fine, I guess," Sam says, wishing he sounded more confident than he feels. Dr. Johnson nods again, then smiles softly.

"I promise that none of my assistants will ever see your face, Mr. Winchester." With that, he's gone, leaving Sam and Jody slack-jawed in the examination room. It only takes Sam one look to know that Jody didn't tell Dr. Johnson who Sam was. The doctor knew the whole time and didn't say a word, didn't even hesitate. Dr. Johnson may seem trustworthy, but at the moment, anyone who knows who Sam is is a risk. And Sam is about to let this man drug him and operate on his leg. What has Sam gotten himself into?

It says something about Dr. Johnson's level of experience that he doesn't even flinch when Sam shoots into a seated position post-surgery, eyes wide and chest heaving. The doctor simply smiles and leaves the room, and about thirty seconds later Jody walks in holding a bag of Biggerson's.

"Did it work?" Sam asks, and Jody replies with an uncomfortable half-smile. Sam can understand why. His legs are currently covered by a blanket, but the answer to his question is still obvious. Only one of Sam's legs extends the full length of the bed.

"Dr. Johnson told me that the surgery was a success, although he did have to amputate your leg a little farther up than before due to the level of damage from the metal plates," Jody explains. "He took measurements while you were still out and he's looking for a temporary prosthetic right now." Sam nods, wondering both what his new leg will look like and how long it will be before he can actually use it. Sam isn't stupid—he knows that custom prosthetic legs take days to make properly, and he also knows that his leg has to heal before he can even wear one. If Sam is up and walking again in a month, it will be a miracle.

Miracles seem to happen to Sam almost as often as curses.
Jody, noticing Sam's discomfort, holds out one of the Biggerson's burgers. It's wrapped in paper, radiating warmth, and it smells delicious, but when Sam's eyes land on the logo printed on the wrapper, his stomach begins to twist.

Suddenly he's seeing not the wrapper but a larger sign, painted onto the wall. As Sam stares, confused, something shrieks behind him and the logo is sprayed with red, the liquid arching across the picture. Sam looks around wildly, watching as bodies fall left and right seemingly of their own accord, and then he catches a glimpse of a blond man stabbing a woman in the chest with an angel blade and terror watches over him. Sam knows what he's seeing.

"Sam, check the back!" Dean orders as he pulls the angel blade out of the woman's back and lets her body drop to the floor. Sam's legs apparently have a mind of their own because they start moving without warning, taking Sam into the kitchen and toward a walk-in freezer in the back of the room. When a man dressed in a fast food uniform appears out of nowhere and grins, showing Sam his pure black eyes, Sam's arms take control of themselves, too, and his hands shove an angel blade through the demon's chest. As the body slumps to the ground, Sam pulls the blade out of its chest and continues forward. He opens the door to the large freezer and stops in his tracks, staring in disbelief at the contents of the room.

Every inch of the freezer, every nook and cranny is stuffed with C4. It's stacked to the ceiling and covering the floor, filling the room—except for a small pocket directly in front of Sam, in which a clock wired into a trigger is counting down. As Sam stares hopelessly, heart racing, the time on the clock hits 5 minutes.

5:00

4:59

4:58

Sam's legs start moving again and he turns around, seemingly without a second thought, running out of the kitchen and grabbing his brother's arm.

Just as quickly as it appeared, the restaurant vanishes, leaving Sam shaking in the hospital bed, his breathing heavy and his heart racing. Jody is wearing a concerned look and the food has disappeared, along with the Biggerson's logo that set Sam off in the first place. Sam knows now how one bomb could destroy half of Lebanon. He's never seen that amount of explosives in such a small space before, never seen that much power. He's almost surprised the explosion wasn't bigger, didn't have a bigger impact, didn't cause even more destruction. The fact that there are still people missing, still rubble to search through, suddenly makes a lot more sense.

Sam saw the bomb that destroyed Lebanon, the bomb that destroyed his life. And he saw himself run away without even trying to disarm it.

A mixture of guilt and sorrow washes over Sam and he bows his head as the emotions overwhelm him. His heartbeat is loud in his ears and he concentrates on that, letting the pulse distract him from the other sounds and senses that are quickly growing harsher. For the first time, Sam is actually prepared for the overstimulation, and he rides it out, eyes squeezed shut and hands clamped over his ears as he focuses all of his attention on his not-so-steady heartbeat. It isn't until that sound has faded away that Sam opens his eyes again, and when he does he finds Dr. Johnson waiting, poised to lift the blanket off of Sam's legs.

"Sam, are you okay?" Jody asks anxiously. Sam nods, taking a deep breath in an attempt to slow his heart rate. Dr. Johnson reaches slowly for the blanket, looking to Sam for approval. Sam nods
again, and Dr. Johnson pulls off the blanket. Sam avoids looking down, choosing instead to watch Dr. Johnson's face as the doctor begins to undo the bandages covering Sam's right leg—and promptly freezes, his eyes widening almost comically.

"This is..." Dr. Johnson trails off as he pulls his hands away, setting the bloody bandages down on the bed. Sam follows the doctor's gaze to his thigh and his throat tightens as he takes in the scarred stump that rests on the bed alongside Sam's completely ordinary left leg.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Jody asks, leaning forward and focusing her attention not on Sam's leg but on Dr. Johnson's confusion. Sam tries to force himself to do the same, but his eyes keep coming back to his leg. He knew that most of his leg would be gone. He knew it would be strange to see. That was all supposed to happen. But what wasn't?

"Your leg is completely healed." Dr. Johnson says, his voice shaking slightly. "The cuts from the surgery are gone, and the stitches have dissolved and scarred over. You've completely healed in a matter of hours." Sam nods, swallowing hard around the lump in his throat. He knew he had accelerated healing, but nothing like this. It took days for his ribs to heal even with the added healing factor, so how can the surgical cuts—the amputation cuts—already be gone?

Sam thinks that there must be something affecting the strength of his abilities—it's the only explanation for the changes in his strength and healing, and even the intensity of his yellow eyes—but he doesn't know what, and he has no idea how to figure it out.

Dr. Johnson shares a look with Jody then turns, leaving the room without another word.

"Sam, do-"

"I have no clue." Sam cuts off Jody's question, shaking his head. "I still have no clue what exactly the demons did to me, and I obviously don't know what all of the effects were. I don't know what's going on, Jody, and it's terrifying." Jody smiles sympathetically, nodding.

"I know, Sam." She says as Dr. Johnson returns, carrying a long plastic container with a lid. "I promise, we'll figure this out.

"Here we go." Dr. Johnson says, setting the box down on the bed and opening it up to reveal a silver prosthetic leg. It looks relatively similar to Sam's old one—other than the top, of course—but Sam can tell that it's better built, stronger and more capable of actually holding his weight. "I was planning to keep you for observation for at least another day, but I understand that you want to keep a low profile, and since your leg has healed quite well and you've already been using a prosthetic, I'll just show you how to put this on and let you go." Sam nods, thankful for the doctor's willingness to look the other way—he can't even explain what happened to himself, much less to a non-supernaturally-inclined doctor. And Sam is definitely ready to get out of here. He needs to get back to Manhattan before Karen gets out of work, with or without Dr. Johnson's blessing.

Luckily for Sam, Dr. Johnson is a good teacher. Less than an hour later, Sam and Jody are walking—and Sam is really walking—back to Jody's car, ready to drive back into the city. And while the new prosthetic isn't perfect—which is unsurprising, considering Dr. Johnson got it for Sam in only a few hours—it's much sturdier than the old one. And this one is actually removable.

With a shiny new functional prosthetic—and none of the memories that came with the old one—Sam finds himself humming along to the song on the radio, a small smile on his face. With the rusted prosthetic gone, Sam is one step closer to forgetting what happened and starting his new life. He's almost as excited as he is scared.
Chapter 19

The attack comes out of nowhere, but Sam should have expected it. Should have known that the Demon would strike sooner rather than later, especially with the progress Sam and his friends have been making.

Should have tried harder to save her.

The night of the attack—like most tragedies in Sam's life—starts just like any other. Sam follows Karen Page home from work, waits until she steps into her apartment building, then leaves to stop an arms deal a couple of blocks away. When the offending parties are in handcuffs and the police are on their way—thanks in part to Daredevil, who stopped in on his way to Nelson's house—Sam heads back to Karen's apartment. The blonde is waiting on the roof with a pair of coffees, and when Sam lands beside her, she doesn't even flinch, simply offering him one of the drinks. In the week since Karen cornered Sam on this roof, she's started waiting for him every other day, updating Sam on her investigation into the Demon's identity in exchange for detailed accounts on Darkside and Daredevil's escapades. Today, as usual, Sam and Karen start with pleasantries, exchanging words about the coffee and Karen's latest article and Nelson's newest case—the lawyer is apparently being forced to defend a drug dealer Sam and Daredevil brought in about a week ago. Before long, though, the conversation shifts to the Demon.

Sam should have known that that would be the trigger.

"So, how's your demon-hunting going?" Karen asks almost too casually, and Sam nearly jumps out of his skin. It takes him a minute—a full 60 seconds, literally—to register that Karen meant Sam's current hunt for the Demon rather than his past demon-hunting escapades. By the time Sam manages to calm himself down, Karen has taken notice of his fairly obvious moment of panic. Luckily for Sam, the blonde doesn't mention his out-of-place reaction, other than to raise one eyebrow.

"Not good," Sam says in an attempt to move the conversation forward. "I haven't actually seen him since he tried to convince me to leave Hell's Kitchen, and that was over three weeks ago now."

"Is he avoiding you?" Karen suggests, and Sam shrugs.

"I'm not sure." He admits, rubbing the back of his neck. "After the whole thing with the arms dealers, he hasn't really done anything, specifically to undermine me or otherwise. I'd say he was taking a break, but I've never been what you'd consider optimistic."

"You think he's planning something." It's a statement, but Sam nods anyway.

"I think he's biding his time until I make a mistake, and that's when he'll strike," Sam says. "That, or he's got something big hiding in the wings that he's getting ready to put into motion. If he hasn't already."

"I guess we'll have to be careful, then," Karen says.

"We are being careful," Sam replies. "Everyone the Demon may try to target has protection, and Daredevil and I have been keeping an eye out for any other incidents." Karen smiles a little bit at this, twisting a strand of hair around her finger.

"You aren't worried that he might attack soon?" She asks after a minute, the smile dropping abruptly from her face as she raises an eyebrow.
"I'm more worried about the fact that he isn't attacking right now," Sam explains. "He may have taken out those three high-profile arms dealers to get me on the general public's bad side, but I think that was also a strategic hit. The Demon is trying to monopolize the arms trade, and people are starting to take notice. Sooner or later, the rest of the dealers are going to go after him. So why would he just stop now?"

"To make them relax." Karen guesses. "Make his competitors think he's left the game, and they'll let their guard down. Then he can hit them when they least expect it. He could kill the entire market in one fell swoop."

"Ugh, why do supervillains have to be so complicated?" Sam asks with an exaggerated groan.

Karen laughs, then shrugs. "I wish I knew." She replies. "If there's one thing bad guys love, it's convoluted plans. I wouldn't be surprised if the Demon followed that theme." Sam nods, raising an eyebrow when Karen quickly sovers up, shifting awkwardly. She uncrosses her arms and twists a strand of blonde hair around her finger. She's obviously worried about something.

"What is it?" Sam asks, confused by the blonde's sudden mood shift. A second ago, she was completely fearless and analytical, but now she seems nervous. At Sam's question, Karen casts a nervous glance across the empty rooftop.

"The Demon," Karen says hesitantly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "I think I know who he is."

And just like that, all hell breaks loose.

As if triggered by Karen's words, the roof-access door slams open and five men storm the roof. They're all dressed in black and each man is holding a large gun—Sam doesn't really have time to figure out exactly what kind—all of which are aimed directly at Karen. Sam grabs the blonde, shoving her behind him. She presses her back against a wall—Sam's not sure what's on the other side, but he didn't see a door—and Sam steps directly in front of her, staring the five men down.

They're definitely the Demon's lackeys, but—luckily for Sam and Karen—they don't appear to be demons themselves. Sam could take them on easily, except that he fears there may be backup waiting just out of sight. Powerful backup. And besides, Sam can't risk leaving Karen unattended for a second. One second is enough time for a demon to grab someone and disappear forever.

One hand firmly planted on Karen's arm, Sam glares at the Demon's henchmen, yellow eyes flashing.

Two of the men—shorter and smaller than the rest and most likely the youngest—have the decency to look uncomfortable, but the other three don't so much as flinch at Sam's display of dominance, gazes hard as they point their semi-automatics at Sam and the blonde reporter who stands frozen behind him.

"What do you want?" Sam asks, voice low and dark. The two smallest men exchange worried looks, but the man in the center—the largest, and most likely the leader—simply steps forward, sending Sam a haughty grin.

"We want you gone and the girl dead." The man says, shifting his gun inconspicuously. The action is routine but practiced, and Sam's enhanced ears pick up the small telltale click of a weapon being cocked. This guy is a professional, definitely more experienced than his companions. He's the one that Sam needs to be the
"And?" Sam repeats the word that stuck out to him most—the fact that that word wasn't 'dead' should be a little more surprising than it is—and watches as the man's smirk only widens.

"You aren't the only troublemaker in Hell's Kitchen." The man explains. "The boss wants you gone, sure, but he also has to take care of your red, horned friend. And this little lady here is the easiest way to do that."

"Miss Page is under my protection," Sam says, wondering how much of his and Karen's conversation the henchmen heard. He prays that they didn't hear Karen say that she knew the Demon's identity—that may be the only thing that can save her should Sam fail to protect her. The five men raise their guns in unison and Sam subconsciously shifts his weight onto his good leg. "If you want to get to her, you'll have to go through me first." Sam knows what the leader is going to say—and do—as soon as the words leave his mouth.

"My pleasure." The man sneers, squeezing the trigger and firing the first shot.

The sound of the gun going off spurs the other men into action, and soon a hail of bullets is flying toward Sam and Karen. Karen tenses instinctively, but Sam's instincts act differently, and he releases his hold on the reporter in order to aim both palms at the approaching bullets. The bullets freeze, suspended in midair like a cloud of silver droplets until Sam drops his hands. Then the bullets fall, bouncing harmlessly on the concrete roof.

The two smallest men turn and bolt from the roof. The remaining three raise their weapons again.

Before they have the chance to fire again, Sam raises his hands, waving each palm toward opposite sides of the roof. Two of the guns fly from their owners' hands, clattering to the ground several yards away. The central man, the leader, holds his ground, that shit-eating grin still frozen on his face even as his remaining two companions begin to edge toward the door.

"Give up now before I do something I regret," Sam warns, glaring at the three lackeys. He won't kill them—he isn't sure who would be angrier if he did, him or Daredevil—but he may accidentally cause some serious injury. Sam still isn't totally confident in his control over his abilities, still isn't even totally sure how they work, and he's afraid that if he gets too angry, he might underestimate his own strength. And the last thing that Darkside's reputation needs is witnesses watching him throw a guy off of a roof.

Unsurprisingly, the leader doesn't back down, step back, or even change his expression. Instead, he opens his mouth and starts to laugh.

"You're going to regret that." The man says, still laughing.

Behind Sam, Karen starts to scream.

Sam spins around, eyes widening when he sees a demon—not the Demon, but dangerous nonetheless—walking slowly backward, his arms wrapped around Karen's chest. She's struggling as hard as she can but her arms are pinned to her sides, and Sam knows from experience that there's no way Karen can break free from the demon's hold.

Sam starts to move in Karen's direction but he's stopped by the familiar feeling of a gun barrel pressed into the small of his back.

"Nuh-uh, Darkside." The leader of the lackeys says into Sam's ear, whistling softly. Sam shivers at the feeling of the man's breath, biting the inside of his cheek. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. Wouldn't want to ruin that pretty jacket of yours." Sam stiffens as the man's words echo in his
mind, triggering another memory—not of the demons and the red-walled room but of the Cage. And in that moment, the blond-haired demon holding Karen captive looks strikingly like Lucifer, his grin rooting Sam to the spot. Somehow, despite the freshness and the pain of the demons' torture, the memories of the Cage are far more debilitating.

Frozen, Sam watches through his memory-induced haze as the demon drags Karen toward the edge of the roof.

"Remember, Darkside, when Daredevil asks what happened, to tell him the truth." The man holding the gun to Sam's back says, his breath cold against Sam's ear. "This ain't the Demon's fault. It's yours." Sam figures the statement is pretty ironic, seeing as no matter who you blame—the Demon, the demon who is about to throw Karen off of a roof, or Sam—a demon is still technically at fault.

The irony quickly becomes the last thing on Sam's mind when the demon turns, smirks, and tosses a screaming Karen off the edge of the roof without a moment's hesitation.

Sam acts before he thinks, picturing the side of the building in his mind—he figures that if he can teleport to Karen, he can grab her mid-fall and teleport them both to safety—but he finds himself not in freefall but standing at the edge of the roof beside the demon. Sam stares in confusion as the demon winks, eyes flashing black as he vanishes. Then Karen's unbroken scream draws Sam's eyes over the roof's edge. Karen is still falling, thanks to the height of the building, but there's no way Sam will be able to save her if he doesn't act fast. Instincts kick in and Sam holds out his hand. Karen jerks to a stop midair, her scream abruptly cutting off from shock buck quickly starting back up again once she realizes that she's suspended midair about 50 feet off of the ground. Sam tries to use his telekinesis to pull Karen back up to the roof but she doesn't move, and he isn't willing to risk lowering her to the ground—she's still high enough that the drop would most likely kill her. Sam has to make a plan, and fast, but he finds himself overwhelmed by memories of red rooms and meat hooks and a series of sinister laughs that grow louder and louder.

Luckily for Sam, the Demon's lackeys make his impossible decision for him.

Gunfire fills the air as the three remaining henchmen fire repeatedly at Sam, and his last thought of self-preservation sends him sailing off of the roof without a second thought. Karen is picking up speed below him, having begun falling again as soon as Sam jumped. She's flailing and screaming and—to Sam's dismay—drawing the attention of the general public standing on the street below. Swallowing hard, Sam straightens his legs and tucks his arms into his sides, rocketing toward Karen—luckily, her body is spread out enough that she's falling more slowly than he is. Sam holds out one hand and Karen freezes in place once more, staring up at Sam with wide eyes as he falls toward her, accelerating every second. As Sam approaches Karen—and the pedestrian-filled street below—he begins to notice the flash of several cameras. This whole ordeal is going to be all over the internet in seconds, if it isn't already streaming live. Either Sam saves Karen in front of the world, or they both die in the same fashion—and take out who knows how many people on the ground along the way.

Sam knows which ending he'd prefer.

Sam releases Karen from his telekinetic hold as soon as he gets close to her, and as they both fall, he reaches out, trying to grab hold of Karen's arm. She reaches out as well, and the second skin meets skin, Sam closes his eyes, twisting around sharply.

A few seconds later, Sam's back slams into the ground with a resounding crack, and a wave of pain sends him straight into darkness.
Sorry for the late update, I had a very busy day yesterday so I had no time to post. I'm also sorry for that cliffhanger in the last chapter. Enjoy the resolution of that—and some more fun angst. :)

The first thing Sam is aware of is a constant pounding just behind his eyes.

It's not exactly unusual for Sam to wake up to a headache, but something hidden among his scattered thoughts tells him that this isn't just a hangover. Although his memories are clouded—between that and the headache, Sam figures he's probably more concussed than hungover—Sam does remember a few important details. Firstly, he doesn't have a bed at the moment, which explains the hard surface he's lying on. Secondly, his brother is in prison, which explains the lack of rock music or out-of-tune singing. What Sam doesn't remember is anything that could explain how he ended up lying on the ground... somewhere... with a concussion.

When Sam finally decides to open his eyes, he finds Karen Page leaning over him, tears in her eyes. That image is enough to bring all of Sam's previously unreachable memories back, crashing like a wave. He suddenly recalls the Demon's henchmen, the actual demon, Karen's scream, the fall. He vaguely remembers the impact that immediately knocked him out.

The concussion suddenly makes a lot more sense.

"Oh that god, you're okay," Karen says breathlessly, drawing Sam's attention back to the present. Karen moves backward as Sam slowly pushes himself into a seated position—a decision he regrets when he's promptly overwhelmed by nausea. Sam turns away from Karen, pulling his mask down and puking his guts out. Apparently worried, Karen steps forward, holding Sam's hair out of his face with one hand and rubbing his back with the other as he heaves.

"How long... was I out?" Sam asks once he has his stomach under control, turning back to Karen to find expressions of concern and relief warring on her face. Other than an angry-looking patch of red skin on her right arm, Karen looks pretty much uninjured. While he wasn't quite as lucky, Sam doesn't appear to be too much worse off—other than his intense headache and a minor ache in his back, Sam isn't aware of any serious breaks or cuts, external or otherwise. Either Sam and Karen were extremely lucky, or Sam's half-baked plan actually worked—and as Sam takes in his surroundings and realizes that he and Karen are currently in the alley where he met Franklin Nelson last week, Sam figures that he knows the answer.

"About an hour," Karen says, answering a question Sam already barely remembers asking. His memories of the altercation on the roof and the subsequent fall are intact, albeit fuzzy, and Sam can't help but wonder how much of that is actually due to his probably minor concussion.

After all, Sam has been having quite a few problems with his memory as of late.

"I think you have a concussion, but it's minor, so I think you really just passed out from shock." Karen continues, and Sam nods. Shock sounds about right, although if it's shock from hitting the ground or from teleporting two people in midair, he couldn't say.
Something tingles in the back of Sam's head and he lifts his hand, touching his upper lip. Sam can't say he's surprised when he pulls his hand away and finds flakes of dry blood on his fingertips.

"And you're okay?" Sam asks, setting aside his own injuries in order to focus on the blonde reporter standing uncomfortably before him. Karen nods, holding out her injured arm.

"You must have switched our positions at the last second because you definitely took the brunt of the impact." She explains. "I skinned my arm a bit, as you can see, but I think that's pretty much it." Sam nods again, biting the inside of his cheek as he scans his surroundings once more. The alley is definitely empty, a fact Sam is able to quickly confirm with his handy soul vision—although the fact that he didn't notice the presence of his yellow vision sooner does give Sam pause. The normally overwhelming white glow of Karen's soul is so dim that Sam didn't even notice it, making him wonder how accurate his check of the surrounding area actually was. Maybe the concussion messed with Sam's yellow vision?

Rather than investigate the limitations of his powers with a busted head, Sam just blinks slowly, allowing the yellow to fade from his vision. Sam isn't entirely surprised when the action alleviates his headache slightly.

"I'm sorry about what happened, Miss Page, but I'm glad you're okay," Sam says, climbing to his feet and putting one hand out to steady himself against the alley wall when another wave of dizziness promptly washes over him. Karen doesn't respond, her gaze sharp and focused on Sam's now-bare face. He simply lets her examine him—the woman just fell off of a building, she has more than earned the right to know what her savior looks like—and it only takes a few seconds for recognition to dawn on the reporter's face.

"You're..." Karen trails off, seemingly lost for words. After a minute, she shakes her head. Sam almost smiles.

"Sam Winchester, ma'am." He says softly. "Wanted for the bombing of Lebanon, Kansas this past October."

"And missing ever since," Karen adds, an edge to her tone. "And now you're moonlighting as a vigilante in Manhattan."

"In my defense, I didn't actually bomb Lebanon," Sam explains, holding up his hands. "Those men who just tried to kill us, particularly the one who threw you off the roof, did it. They framed Dean and me."

"I just want to be perfectly clear here," Karen says, crossing her arms. "If you hadn't just saved my life, I would never have believed that in a million years." She's obviously trying her hardest to keep her face void of emotion, but Sam has been studying expressions for years. Karen is clearly terrified, and Sam has to give her props for the amount of success she's having in hiding it.

"Valid," Sam replies, a ghost of a smile forming on his face. "Dean and I haven't exactly been even there?" Karen asks, switching abruptly to her reporter's voice. Sam is pretty sure the tone shift is instinctive, although he isn't certain if it's a reaction to the new information or her fear.

"We were trying to stop the bombing," Sam explains. "I think we found the bomb, realized we couldn't defuse it and started trying to evacuate the area."
"You think?" Karen asks skeptically, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't remember," Sam admits. It's not entirely the truth, but while he remembers seeing the bomb and running, Sam doesn't remember what his motivations were. Maybe he saw a problem he couldn't solve and chose to just run away, but Sam has to hope that the first thought that crossed his mind when he saw that bomb was to get as many people out as he could. "I've been having memory problems." Sam finds himself explaining. "I don't remember the majority of October 5th and I have no memory of any of the days leading up to it. To be honest," he pauses, rubbing the back of his neck, "I have no idea what really happened."

"So theoretically, you could have set the bomb." Karen points out, and Sam shrugs.

"I could have." He admits. "But I have to believe that I'm a better person than that. Besides, I'm pretty sure that the explosion was a trap, anyway."

"What do you mean?" Karen asks curiously, sounding almost excited. Sam really hopes that this conversation doesn't end up in the papers tomorrow—although to be fair, Karen has kept Daredevil's identity a secret for who knows how long, so there's a good chance she won't spill about Darkside's.

"I'm not sure how, exactly... like I said, I'm still a bit fuzzy on the details, but shortly after the bombing, I was kidnapped." Sam is rambling, freely giving Karen information he probably shouldn't even be saying out loud, but he finds that he doesn't really care. Without Dean or Cas or any of his other close friends, Sam hasn't really had anyone to vent to. And while Dean has always been the type to bottle up his feelings and ignore his problems, Sam is quite the opposite—his favorite method of therapy is to just talk it out. "I was tortured and experimented on for about four months before I escaped. Found myself stranded in Hell's Kitchen with the FBI on my tail in relation to a bombing I didn't even know had happened. I don't remember much of what happened when I was kidnapped, either, so ending up in New York in the middle of February when the last thing I remembered was Kansas in October really knocked me on my ass. The fact that my brother is in prison awaiting trial didn't really help, either." Karen frowns at this comment, sending Sam a look that he can only describe as mildly suspicious. "What?" Sam asks defensively.

"How do I know you aren't just making this up?" Karen challenges and Sam bites the inside of his cheek.

"You don't." He admits. "Look, you have no reason to trust me, I know that. But I think that I'm innocent. And I do have proof about the kidnapping thing, and maybe the bombing. Sort of."

"How so?" Karen asks, and Sam grins, letting his yellow eyes flash.

"I haven't had superpowers forever." He explains. "I told you that Daredevil is training me, right? I just got my powers. And I certainly wasn't given them by choice."

"And the bombing?" Karen asks. Sam leans against the wall of the alley, rolling up the leg of his jeans and revealing his shiny new prosthetic leg—and pausing as it suddenly occurs to Sam that without the new leg, the altercation on the rooftop might have gone very differently.

"While I don't remember the exact circumstances, I'm 99 percent sure that I lost my leg in the explosion in Lebanon," Sam explains. Karen's eyes are wide in disbelief, and Sam briefly wonders if her surprise is because Sam Winchester has a prosthetic leg or because Darkside has one. "I managed to get into contact with an old friend a little over a week ago," Sam continues, "and a few days ago she was able to get me in to see a doctor. Under the radar, of course. According to him, the trauma in my upper leg is approximately what it would look like if a leg was separated at the
knee by brute force, then amputated further semi-professionally." Karen's face starts to get a little green so Sam rolls his jeans back down, obscuring the silver leg.

"That's terrible," Karen says, voice shaking. "That sounds so... painful." Her hands shake in time with her voice, and Sam wonders how similar her mental picture is to his own. After all, neither of them know what really happened.

"I don't remember any specifics, but I do remember the pain," Sam admits. "I get... flashes, sometimes, of memories. Bits and pieces of the bombing and the four months that followed, but rarely anything concrete. Definitely not enough to remember exactly who did it, exactly what they did."

"Not enough to prove your innocence." Karen infers, and Sam nods.

"Exactly." He says, smiling weakly. "That's why I've been hiding here. Helping Daredevil on the streets as Darkside. Trying to use the abilities they gave me for something good." Karen hesitates, obviously worried about something. Sam knows better than to push, though, so he waits for her to find her words—or decide against them.

"Your brother," Karen says after a minute. Sam isn't really surprised—he expected Dean to come up in the conversation sooner if he's being honest—but he's caught off guard by the question anyway. "Will you break him out?"

Now Sam is the one hesitating.

A year ago—hell, five months ago—Sam would have said yes without hesitation. Dean comes before Sam's safety, Sam's life. He always has and, until recently, Sam thought he always would. But now, with the demons and the Demon and the state of New York and the entire world actively working against him, Sam knows that saving Dean isn't a risk he can afford to take. And not because Sam doesn't want to go to prison. Sam knows perfectly well that it's his fault that Dean's trial hasn't started yet. Sam's freedom is the only thing keeping Dean out of prison—or at least, in prison awaiting trial, rather than as a convicted domestic terrorist.

"No," Sam says after a minute, turning to Karen and shaking his head. "I don't think I can risk that right now. Not with the FBI and the Demon on my ass." Karen nods, sympathy flooding her features. Sam is surprised by her reaction—he kind of figured she'd ignore what Sam said and continue to assume that he was willing to do anything for his brother, especially considering their infamous codependency problem that's currently all over the news. Maybe she knows someone who encountered a similar situation. Or maybe Karen and Sam are more similar than he originally thought.

The more he turns Karen's question over in his mind, the more Sam begins to see other issues with breaking Dean out—not on Sam's side, but on his brother's. While Sam has a tendency to see the good in both people and monsters alike, Dean has always had a very rigid sense of right and wrong. Sam remembers Dean's reaction the last time he used any kind of demonic powers—he'll never forget the words spoken to him both by his brother and by the hallucination of his brother brought on by his first brutal detox, never quite get over the striking similarity between their jeers—and the more he thinks about it, the more Sam begins to doubt that Dean would ever accept Darkside. The hero is, after all, based entirely on Sam's demonic powers, down to his eyes. Sam's Darkside persona, even more so than himself, is more demon than human. And Dean has always been the type of hunter who stabs first and asks questions later. If Sam were to encounter Dean dressed in full Darkside gear, he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that he would end up with an angel blade in his stomach.
The very thought makes Sam sick to his stomach, but there isn't a single part of his mind that can find any way to dispute it.

"Sam?" Karen asks softly, and Sam looks up, realizing somewhat sheepishly that he completely lost himself in his own thoughts. The blonde reporter looks concerned, her gaze focused on Sam's eyes—eyes that, Sam realizes after blinking a couple of times, are filled with unshed tears.

"Any more questions, Miss Page?" Sam asks in a halfhearted attempt to shift the topic of conversation away from Dean. To his surprise, Karen actually nods, twisting a strand of hair around her finger.

"Just one," Karen says, and Sam smiles, nodding. "Will you ever tell the world the truth about who Darkside is?" Karen asks, and Sam's smile drops as quickly as it came. "Once the Demon is stopped, once Sam Winchester is free?"

In the past month, Sam has asked himself a lot of questions that he doesn't know the answer to. Somehow, that particular one never crossed his mind.

If he had a chance—if Darkside was one of the good guys and Sam Winchester was proven innocent—would Sam formally connect his two halves?

"Maybe," Sam says with a shrug. "The truth is, I'm not entirely sure that Darkside and Sam Winchester are even the same person. The person I was before Lebanon isn't even the same person I am now. I don't know which Sam I feel more like. The one of before, or the one of after. And Darkside is something else entirely." Sam hesitates, biting the inside of his cheek. "I think I broke somewhere along the way, and Darkside is my strange way of trying to put myself back together again."

"Well, I wish you luck in that, Sam," Karen says, smiling warmly. "You know, I think you're actually a--" Karen is cut off when Sam jumps, surprised. His phone is vibrating in his pocket, which is unusual—not because Sam isn't used to being called, after all, Jody called him a few days ago, but because he had no idea this phone even had a vibrate function, much less how he managed to turn it on.

Sam pulls the burner phone out of his pocket and puts it up to his ear—no Caller ID, of course—listening in confusion to the muffled sounds on the other end.

"Hello?" Sam asks after a minute, sending Karen a shrug in response to her confused look. Sam raises an eyebrow in order to convey his own confusion, but his expression quickly twists into one of shock as he registers the voice on the other line.

"Sam... it's Daredevil. I'm hurt... bad. Alley with... drunk. Help..."
"Sam... it's Daredevil. I'm hurt... bad. Alley with... drunk. Help..."

Before Sam can even think about responding, the phone clicks and a dial tone fills his ears. Karen raises an eyebrow when Sam drops his arm to his side, frowning. If Daredevil's words weren't enough to spur Sam into action, his tone is. The vigilante's normally indecipherable voice was filled with barely-masked fear and obvious pain, and his strained breathing only served to drive the point home. Daredevil is hurt. Badly. The idea is enough to knock Sam off-kilter, a brutal reminder that no one is truly invincible.

Because in Sam's mind, Daredevil has always been invincible. Sam has been training with Daredevil for three weeks now, has stopped criminals ranging from purse-snatchers to gang leaders. And every time, Sam and Daredevil have both managed to escape without a scratch. Sam—who has been forcibly made aware of his mortality on multiple occasions—has been attributing his own lack of injuries to beginner's luck. Looking back now, he realizes that subconsciously, he always equated Daredevil's tendency to escape even the most difficult situations without so much as a scratch to not luck or even skill but an untouchableness, an inability for the vigilante to even get hurt in the first place. Daredevil rescued Sam from the demons and from himself, gave him trust and kindness when Sam had nowhere else to turn. And in Sam's mind, that simple act of goodwill elevated Daredevil to a position formerly occupied on several occasions by Sam's brother and his father—that is, an impenetrable hero.

It's a small comfort to Sam that at least some of his childhood naïvety has remained intact.

But, Sam's internal troubles aside, the matter still stands that the very-penetrable Daredevil is injured, most likely seriously, and Sam is the only one who knows where he is.

A voice in the back of Sam's mind points out that even without invincibility, Daredevil is a trained fighter. It should still have been incredibly difficult for anyone to even get the drop on him, much less leave him for dead. But there's no question that Daredevil lost this fight. And there's only one person in Hell's Kitchen Sam knows could beat Daredevil that easily.

Sam begins to wonder if the attack on him and Karen on the rooftop was simply a distraction. After all, the Demon's lackeys did mention that they wanted to take both Darkside and Daredevil out of the equation. The pair of vigilantes have been working closely together, so it makes sense that the Demon would try to attack them separately. And since Sam suspects that the Demon is afraid of Sam, it's entirely logical that he would send his men to distract Sam while he went after Daredevil on his own.

Shoving his phone into his pocket, Sam grabs the edge of his mask, pulling it back up to cover his mouth.

"Sam, what's going on?" Karen asks as Sam's eyes flash yellow, her confusion twisting into worry.

"That was Daredevil," Sam explains, hoping that his tone conveys his urgency. "He sounded hurt. Badly hurt. I've got to go." Sam doesn't wait for Karen's response, teleporting away as soon as the words leave his mouth. Moments later, Sam finds himself standing in a different alley, distinctly similar—the alleys in Manhattan, Sam has noticed, are generally indistinguishable—but distinctly familiar. The main identifying feature is the surprisingly large hole in the wall to Sam's right and the crumbling stone still piled beneath it. This is the alley where it all started, the alley where Sam first met Daredevil, the alley where he first put on a mask. This is the alley where, over a month
ago, Sam fought a drunk man to save a young woman and his new life began.

Sitting in the same place where Sam once hid away from the rain and the demons, the same place where the young woman pressed into the wall to avoid the drunk's advances, is Daredevil. Sam isn't surprised to find the vigilante waiting there. What stops Sam in his tracks is the state Daredevil appears to be in.

The red-horned vigilante is slumped against the wall in a way that implies that the solid concrete is the only thing keeping him upright. His mouth and chin are coated with blood, as is the ground around him, and the stain on the cement floor is steadily growing. Sam steps slowly toward Daredevil—he knows from experience that you should never approach an injured fighter too fast—taking in more details the closer he gets. The first things to register as Sam gets closer are the dark bruises all over Daredevil's face. His right eye is already beginning to swell shut, and his nose is slightly crooked and probably broken. Daredevil's right hand is resting in his lap, his palm pressed lightly against his stomach, protecting it and receiving protection in return. Sam wouldn't be surprised to learn that the vigilante has both broken ribs and a broken arm. But what catches and holds Sam's gaze is Daredevil's other hand—the vigilante's left palm is clamped around the left side of his neck, and even from 15 feet away Sam can easily see the blood flowing between Daredevil's fingers.

Sam takes another step and Daredevil finally appears to notice him, tilting his head to one side. The vigilante's right ear is pointed directly at Sam but his eyes are facing straight at the far wall of the alley, and Sam begins to wonder if Daredevil has a concussion. It wouldn't exactly come as a surprise considering the rest of the vigilante's injuries.

"Darkside..." Daredevil mumbles, gritting his teeth as he slowly turns to face Sam. The action appears to be too much for the injured vigilante, who has barely met Sam's eyes when he starts to slide sideways down the wall. If Sam could see Daredevil's eyes, he figures that they probably would have just slipped closed. Recalling Daredevil's possible concussion, Sam breaks into a run, catching Daredevil just before his head slams into the ground.

"Daredevil," Sam says, voice barely a whisper as he gives the other vigilante a more in-depth examination. Up close, it's obvious that the damage is far more extensive that Sam could have possibly imagined. Daredevil's nearly-indestructible suit is riddled with cuts and holes, and even his cowl is split right down the middle—a result, Sam quickly realizes, of the impact of a bullet that's still lodged in the center of the mask, a fraction of an inch from Daredevil's forehead. "Daredevil!" Sam exclaims urgently, his fear of a concussion increasing tenfold. Daredevil is limp in Sam's arms but Sam is unwilling to risk shaking him for fear of aggravating his injuries further. When Daredevil doesn't respond, doesn't so much as twitch, Sam adjusts his grip, closing his eyes and turning to the only person he can.

"What the hell?" The familiar voice of Claire Temple rings in Sam's ears and he opens his eyes to find himself and Daredevil lying on the floor of the nurse's apartment.

"He's hurt," Sam says, releasing Daredevil and coughing weakly. Sam stands and the horned vigilante falls to the ground, looking for all intents and purposes like a ragdoll, limp and ragged. Sam takes a few unsteady steps back, watching in confusion as two Claires head for two Daredevils. Sam closes his eyes, waiting for the wave of lightheadedness to pass. When he opens them again, Claire is kneeling at Daredevil's side, starting a cursory examination. Sam opens his mouth to explain the situation but is stopped when something wet lands on his tongue that tastes distinctly like copper. Fear washes over Sam as he lifts his hand to his face, touching his fingertips to his upper lip and grimacing when they come away red. Sam has obviously overexerted himself tonight with the numerous teleportations and the fight on the rooftop. If Sam doesn't slow down,
"Hey, Daredevil, I need you to tell me what happened," Claire says soothingly as she reaches for the zipper on Daredevil's suit. The seemingly unconscious vigilante jerks awake suddenly and his right hand darts out, wrapping around Claire's wrist in a death grip.

"Daredevil, what happened?" Sam asks, trying to remind the panicked vigilante of his surroundings. Sam's words appear to have the intended effect and Daredevil relaxes slightly, loosening his grip on Claire's arm but not quite letting go.

"Demon." Daredevil says weakly, rolling his head to the side until he's looking in Sam's general direction. "I found... Demon. Fought 'im. Lost." Daredevil smiles to himself, then groans, reaching for his neck with his free hand.

"Daredevil, I need you to hold still," Claire says. "I have to get this suit off so that I can see your injuries." Daredevil turns back to Claire, nodding slowly and finally releasing her arm. The nurse acts quickly, unzipping Daredevil's suit and helping the vigilante remove it. When the material passes Daredevil's stomach, Sam turns away, shaking his head. Daredevil may be injured, but he should get to keep his pride. Sam doesn't even know the man's name, so is now really the best time for Sam to see him in his underwear?

"Sam, I could use your help with this," Claire says exasperatedly, and Sam frowns.

"But-"

"His mask is staying on, just get your ass over here." Claire cuts off Sam's protest. The mask wasn't even something Sam considered, but now that he thinks about it, that's probably going to become an issue. For now, though, the mask can stay on. When it can't anymore, Sam will just have to leave. Sighing, Sam turns around, taking in the sight.

Daredevil is lying in pretty much the same position he was before, except now he's wearing nothing but his cowl and a pair of blood-soaked boxers that may have been white once upon a time. Sam makes to head toward Claire and Daredevil but Claire shakes her head, pointing in the general direction of her bathroom. "First aid kit." She says. "It's in the cabinet under the sink." Sam nods, teleporting to the small bathroom. The kit is easy to locate—the bathroom isn't exactly large and Claire doesn't have much in the way of toiletries—so it doesn't take more than a few seconds for Sam to grab it, teleporting back to the living area. The second Sam registers his surroundings, they start to blur, and a sharp pounding behind Sam's eyes distracts him from the task at hand. By the time Sam's vision clears, Claire has already taken the first aid kit from him and is pulling out a roll of bandages. More blood drips from Sam's nose and he wipes it away, choosing to explicitly ignore his body's warning signs. In a situation like this, every second counts, so why waste precious time walking when you can teleport?

Sam watches Claire work for a while, noticing that while her hands move from cut to cut on Daredevil's chest, her eyes rarely stray from Daredevil's neck. Curiosity takes over and Sam rounds the injured vigilante's body, eyes widening when he finally sees what it is Claire is focusing on—and he also finally realizes why Daredevil is bleeding so badly. There's a single round hole on the left side of Daredevil's neck, oozing a constant stream of blood. Daredevil was shot.

Shit.

While the mere fact that Daredevil was shot—and, since there's only one gunshot wound, chances are the bullet is still inside his neck—is alarming enough, Sam finds himself focusing not on the
injury itself but the fight that lead to it. Daredevil already confirmed that he was fighting the Demon, most likely alone since Daredevil didn't mention anyone else. But Sam knows from experience that demons rarely if ever carry weapons, choosing instead to depend on their strength and their surroundings. Sam has had a weapon pointed at him by a demon on multiple occasions in the past, but more often than not, the weapon belonged to him. In this case, Sam would normally assume the same thing, except that Daredevil doesn't carry a gun. Which means that the Demon actively carries a weapon.

Shit.

"Sam, I need you to keep him talking." Claire orders, pulling Daredevil's hand away from his neck for the third or fourth time. The vigilante groans, turning to his right and staring at Claire's kitchen, and Sam bites the inside of his cheek.

"Daredevil, stay with me," Sam says awkwardly, quickly realizing that this is going to be extremely difficult. Sam knows next to nothing about Daredevil—not his hobbies, his occupation, or even his name. How is Sam supposed to keep the man talking if he doesn't know the first thing about him?

Daredevil lifts his hand toward his neck once again and Claire smiles softly, catching it and giving it a loose squeeze before guiding it back down.

There are, Sam realizes with a smile, a few things he does know about Daredevil.

"Hey, Daredevil, why don't you tell me about Karen?" Sam says, and the smile that forms on the vigilante's face tells Sam that he said the right thing.

"We met... Foggy and I... two years ago." Daredevil says slowly, wincing when Claire starts to wrap a bandage around his neck. "Saved 'er from a kingpin... Fisk. Wanted 'er dead." The more Daredevil speaks, the more slurred his words become, but Claire's urgent look tells Sam that he needs to keep talking.

"Karen is smart," Sam says, and Daredevil nods a little bit. "It only took her three days to figure out that I was following her. She cornered me on the roof of her apartment building and insisted on helping me figure out the Demon's identity. And she may have done it, too." Claire pauses at this, looking up at Sam and raising an eyebrow.

"Who is he?" She asks curiously, and Sam shrugs, biting his cheek.

"No idea. We were attacked before she got the chance to tell me, and Daredevil called me pretty much immediately afterward."

"Is... okay?" Daredevil mumbles, turning his head around to face Sam.

"She's fine," Sam explains with a smile. Daredevil obviously cares quite a bit about Karen. "She skinned her arm, but other than that she made it out alright."

"Which is very lucky, considering I fell off of the roof of my apartment building." Karen's voice follows the sound of an opening door, and Sam turns to see the blonde walking into Claire's apartment, chest heaving. In his hurry to get to Daredevil, Sam kind of forgot about Karen. He told her that her friends was seriously injured then disappeared without any explanation. Karen probably ran all the way here hoping to find Daredevil. Oops.

"You what?" Claire asks in disbelief. Daredevil, probably just registering Karen's voice, attempts to sit up and promptly falls back to the ground, grunting upon impact.
"The Demon's men attacked us," Karen explains. "One of them grabbed me and threw me over the edge, and Sam jumped down after me and saved my life." It's a severe oversimplification of the true events, but Sam can't blame Karen for withholding certain details. After all, the less Daredevil knows, the less likely he is to get panicked. And the less panicked he is, the less likely he is to injure himself further trying to take the Demon on single-handedly for the second time in one night.

"I want details," Claire says, sending Sam a stern look, "but not right now." Karen and Sam watch silently as Claire fastens the bandages on Daredevil's neck and starts disinfecting a few of the smaller abrasions, and the knot in Sam's stomach tightens every time a small—and consistently weaker—sound escapes Daredevil's mouth. After what feels like hours, Claire sits back on her heels, shaking her head and sighing. "He should be okay for now." She says, breathing heavily. Claire doesn't need to say anything else because the implication is clear—Daredevil may not be in immediate danger of dying, but he's definitely far from being in the clear. And despite Claire's reassurance, Sam's instincts are still screaming that this isn't over, that there's something else waiting on the sidelines to deal the final blow.

Daredevil's body—which up to this point has been strangely still—suddenly jerks, and everyone else in the room freezes.

Karen is the first to jump into action, crashing to her knees beside Daredevil and saying something to him that Sam makes an effort not to overhear. Claire starts to run through a set of practiced motions that Sam eventually realizes are steps to assist someone having a seizure. Only then does Sam fully grasp the gravity of the unexpected situation. Daredevil is seizing.

Daredevil is dying.

Before Sam can even figure out how to help, it's over, and Daredevil is back on the floor, just as limp as before. Karen grabs his blood-soaked left hand, gripping it tightly, and Claire starts to check his chest for any injuries she may have missed.

"Maybe it's a concussion?" Sam suggests, cursing himself for forgetting Daredevil's vision problems in the alley. In all of the chaos with the gunshot wound, Sam totally forgot to tell Claire his suspicions.

"It's definitely a concussion," Claire replies, exchanging a look with Karen that Sam instantly recognizes.

"Screw his identity, take off the damn mask and help him!" Sam exclaims irritably. "In case you haven't noticed, me knowing Daredevil's identity is the least of our problems right now. And besides, it's been over a decade since I last came to New York. It's not like I'm going to recognize him." Claire turns back to Karen, who hesitates. "Damn it, Claire, just do it!" Sam yells urgently, eyeing Daredevil's too-still form. "He's already unconscious!" Karen's eyes widen at this and she nods to Claire, who yanks off Daredevil's cowl without hesitation. Messy black hair spills out of the mask as Claire tosses it to the side, focusing her attention on Daredevil's forehead. The vigilante's face is exposed and Sam is honestly so curious but he forces himself to focus on the task at hand, and he doesn't even look at Daredevil's face other than to see if his eyes are closed—they are. While Claire examines Daredevil's forehead, Sam scans the rest of his scalp. Sam's eyes find the top of Daredevil's head—the spot where the bullet initially impacted the cowl, Sam realizes—and the blood drains from his face when his brain finally catches up to his eyes. Daredevil's fluffy black hair is flat and slick against his scalp, so saturated with blood that the red color is clear even through the dark roots.

When he first saw the bullet in Daredevil's cowl, Sam assumed that the mask stopped the bullet. He
wasn't concerned at all. He figured that a bullet in his bulletproof helmet was the least of Daredevil's problems.

He should have known better.

"Oh god, Matt." Karen chokes out, face growing pale as she stares at the same area of Daredevil's head as Sam. Claire takes one look at the injury and pulls out her phone, shaking her head again and again as if the motion will dislodge some hidden information that will save Daredevil's life. Claire presses a few buttons then puts her phone to her ear, and Sam strains to hear the voice on the other line.

"Hello?" A young man asks, his voice faint but his words clear.

"Danny, we've got a problem," Claire says. The second the name 'Danny' leaves her mouth, Karen looks up, sending Claire a surprised look that the nurse ignores.

"What's up?" Danny asks, sounding just a little bit too casual for the situation.

"Remember that clinic you were going to start? Did that ever happen?" Claire asks, urgency starting to leak into her tone.

"We've got a building and supplies, but I haven't found any doctors or nurses," Danny says hesitantly, picking up on the tension in Claire's voice.

"That's not true. You've got me." Claire says. "Listen, I need you to meet me there. Daredevil was seriously injured. He's unconscious right now and I have a feeling he won't be waking up anytime soon." Sam's heart falls into his stomach as the finality of the situation starts to sink in. Daredevil isn't just hurt. Daredevil is dying.

And it's all Sam's fault.

Claire ends the call with a quick farewell and climbs to her feet, shoving her phone into her pocket. Karen drops Daredevil's hand and follows, and Sam watches quietly from the sidelines as the two women gather everything Claire thinks they'll need at the clinic.

"We can use my car," Karen says after a minute, and Claire starts looking around again. It takes Sam a minute—and Claire's failed attempt to lift Daredevil's upper body off of the ground—to realize that she's trying to find something she can use to get Daredevil downstairs.

"I can take him to your car," Sam says. "I can teleport him." Karen and Claire exchange yet another look and Sam scowls. He knows that the two women have no reason to trust him, but that doesn't mean their wariness doesn't hurt. "Look, I'm the only one here who can even lift him. He's seriously injured, and teleporting him to your car will be a lot less dangerous than trying to carry him down the stairs in a desk chair." Sam nods to the chair he noticed Karen eyeing, and the blonde blushes. Both women hesitate, considering Sam's words. After a minute, Claire nods, acknowledging the gravity of the situation. Sam pulls his mask back up and bends over, scooping Daredevil's limp form into his arms and picturing the street outside of the apartment in his mind. Within seconds, Sam is standing on the curb, cradling an unresponsive Daredevil. Sam's head spins and he bites the inside of his cheek, squeezing his eyes shut as he waits out his bout of lightheadedness. By the time Sam is able to focus his vision again, Karen and Claire have already arrived. Sam apparently picked a good landing spot because Karen heads straight for the nearest car, unlocking it and opening the door to the backseat. Claire climbs in first and helps Sam get Daredevil onto the bench seat, pulling lightly on the vigilante's shoulders while Sam attempts to fit his legs inside. Once Daredevil is lying semi-comfortably on the backseat—Karen's car is small
enough that even with Daredevil's head resting on Claire's lap, the vigilante's legs still have to be folded somewhat awkwardly to fit into the car—Sam closes the door, taking a step back. Karen practically jumps into the driver's seat, and Sam watches wordlessly as the blonde starts the car and pulls away from the curb. Sam tracks the vehicle for as long as he can, but it doesn't take long for the small car to become lost in the constant New York traffic.

Another wave of dizziness washes over Sam and he stumbles backward, barely able to catch himself on the side of Claire's apartment building. The dizziness is quick to leave but a strange emotion takes its place, one Sam has trouble identifying at first.

Sam's stomach is tight and his throat is dry. He's terrified for Daredevil, obviously, terrified that the horned vigilante may never wake up, may never get any better. Sam is also guilty, recognizing that Daredevil would never have been hurt in the first place if he hadn't gotten involved with Sam. But Sam also finds himself feeling almost resentful of the raven-haired man he only knows as the Devil of Hell's Kitchen.

Sam saved Karen's life tonight, tried and hopefully succeeded to save Daredevil's, too. He did everything he could to help Claire, to help Karen, to help Daredevil, but despite his best efforts, Sam can't seem to earn the trust of any of them. Sam knew from the first look Karen and Claire shared that they didn't want him to know anything about Daredevil's identity—not his name, not his face, not even his hair color. Sam understands that the women don't want him to know the location of the super secret superhero clinic that someone named Danny is apparently funding. Sam understands why two young women who have too much experience in the world of psychopaths and vigilantes wouldn't immediately trust a man who, in the eye of the public, is the worst kind of evil there is. But being left out, being shoved aside, being abandoned, that cuts Sam deep. As much as he hates to admit it, Sam has found people in Manhattan who he knows he can trust, people he cares about. He actually started to look forward to his lessons with Daredevil, his nighttime talks with Karen, his occasional alleyway meetings with Franklin Nelson.

But none of those people feel the same way about Sam. Where Sam sees safety, they see danger. Where Sam sees the possibility of friendship, they see nothing more than a shaky alliance with someone who can't be trusted. And that's a kind of pain that hits Sam somewhere deep within his soul. It's a kind of pain that he's all too familiar with.

With a small sigh, Sam pushes off of the wall, closing his eyes as the simple motion triggers yet another surge of vertigo. Once he's confident that he won't keel over, Sam starts down the street, slowly making his way toward the alley where he stowed his duffel at sunset, back when he thought tonight was going to be just like any other.

And when Sam starts thrashing around in his sleep two hours later, the name of another blonde woman from another life frozen on his lips, no one is there to release him from his nightmares.
Chapter 22

Sam wakes the next day not from a memory of red walls and yellow eyes but from one of a blonde woman in a white dress. He feels not the sharp prick of a needle but the heat of a fire, smells not the sickening stink of blood but the suffocating stench of smoke and ash. And the nightmare brings back feelings not of fear and anxiety but of guilt and sorrow, emotions that make Sam's heart race, quicken the speed at which it pumps the poison that has plagued him for three decades through his body, corrupting him further with every breath.

Azazel and Lucifer, Crowley and Castiel. Every demon and every angel has told Sam for years that the blood in his veins carries his destiny, influenced his past and his present and will inevitably influence his future. And now, with Jessica Moore and Karen Page following Sam like shadows, he's forced to admit that those angels and demons were probably right.

Everything that happens in Sam's life, every twist and every turn that has brought him to where he is today, always seems to have some connection to the virus in his veins.

Sam has wondered many times before why he never fulfilled the prophecy that was set before him, why he never followed the path that was designed with him in mind. Now, he supposes that his saving grace has never been his own strength. No, Sam is too weak to save himself.

It's always been the others.

First, it was Dean, then Bobby, then Jess, then Jody and Claire and Alex and Charlie and Mary and Jack fell into line, one after the other, another person to move Sam forward, another hand to hold him back. Sam never truly believed in his own humanity, never thought he could be saved alone. Now, he understands. Now, he recognizes that the neverending line of people Sam loved and cared for and protected were his saviors, the true reason he never went down that road that led straight into the fires of Hell. Sam couldn't save himself. They had to save him. They've always been saving him.

But now Sam is alone, lost in a cruel world without anyone by his side, without anyone to move him forward or hold him back. His brother is imprisoned, his friends are all either missing or dead, and there are no angels watching over him.

Sam has prayed every night since he escaped the demons, screamed in his mind until his head pounded and yelled into the world until his voice was hoarse, but he's never gotten so much as a whisper in reply. He isn't surprised.

Heaven has never been a friend to Sam Winchester.

A siren pulls Sam from his thoughts, then pulls him to his feet. As the shrieking sound approaches, Sam looks around—and meets the eyes of a homeless man wearing a smirk and holding a shiny iPhone in his left hand. The single siren becomes a dozen and the homeless man's smile only widens. When Sam growls, eyes flashing yellow, the man simply nods, eyes turning black as he vanishes into thin air. Unable to do a thing about the demon, Sam just throws his blanket over his shoulders and grabs his duffel bag, teleporting to another alley that looks exactly the same as this one. When the police arrive there, too—Sam quickly discovers that there are officers posted at the entrance to nearly every alley in Hell's Kitchen—Sam is forced to look upward, and he teleports to one of the only safe places he has left.

Sam spends the next three nights on the roof of Karen Page's apartment building in order to avoid
the police presence on the streets below. During the day he works quietly on his computer, but at night, his nightmares overwhelm him, and he wakes several times a night screaming in terror, unable to escape the memories that haunt him.

Despite the fact that Sam's screams must have alerted her to his presence, Karen Page never once makes an appearance.

Three days after Sam and Karen's fall, the world finally starts to wonder. Sam hasn't stopped a single crime since he saved Karen, hasn't even left her rooftop, but it takes over 72 hours for the city of New York to recognize his absence, to start asking questions. It's the Bulletin that first asks where Darkside went, and as soon as attention is brought to the masked vigilante's sudden disappearance, rumors begin to fly.

Some people seem to think that Darkside is taking a week off after the very public rescue of a well-known reporter from Hell's Kitchen—apparently, he deserves a break. Others wonder if Darkside even survived the fall, suggesting that perhaps his teleportation stunt didn't go as well as everyone hoped. Karen, to Sam's surprise, is quick to shoot that theory down, explaining on the Bulletin's website that Darkside dropped her in an alley and disappeared, completely uninjured. Despite Karen's interference, the rumors continue to build, and within five hours of the first Bulletin article Darkside has gone viral on Twitter, much to Sam's chagrin.

But there is one unexpected upside to the public's sudden interest in Darkside's big save and subsequent disappearance: Darkside is a hero again. Apparently, saving a pretty blonde reporter from a very public, very painful death is an effective way to get back into the public's graces.

And, as Sam discovers at around noon, four days after the fall, the public's attention on Darkside has the benefit of bringing a very different—and very needed—kind of attention to Sam.

For the third time in ten days, Sam's burner phone rings in his pocket. For the second time in ten days, Jody is the one on the other line.

"Sam, you have to stop worrying me like that," Jody says as soon as Sam answers the call.

"You were worried?" Sam asks, trying to sound like he's teasing her but in actuality probably sounding more surprised.

"You can't jump off of a roof and disappear for three days and expect me to not be worried!" Jody exclaims, and Sam can picture the disappointment in her expression. "What happened? Were you injured?"

"No, Jody, I'm fine, I swear," Sam says. The statement isn't entirely true—Sam is pretty sure he got a mild concussion, a bruised tailbone, and at least one bruised rib in the fall—but Jody doesn't need to know that. "I just needed to take some time."

"Some time for what?" Jody asks, her disappointment rapidly morphing into concern.

"The night of the fall, Daredevil tried to fight the Demon on his own," Sam explains, biting the inside of his cheek. "He got hurt pretty bad, and as far as I'm aware, he has yet to wake up."

"As far as you're aware?" Jody repeats suspiciously.

"I've met three of Daredevil's friends so far," Sam explains. "Two of them know that I'm Sam Winchester, a nurse and the woman that I saved that night in the fall. They don't trust me, understandably, with Daredevil's identity. When I found Daredevil lying in an alley and brought
him to the nurse's apartment, she decided to take him to some special vigilante clinic run by a friend of hers. And she made it very clear that she didn't intend to give me the address."

"I'm sorry, Sam," Jody says sincerely, and Sam finds himself shrugging even though he knows no one is around to see it.

"Can't say I blame them," Sam says. "Karen, the woman I saved, she's a reporter. Claire is a nurse. The first thing either of them should have done when they learned my identity was call the police, but neither of them did. They're keeping my identity safe. They don't owe me anything more than that."

"You saved this woman's life, Sam," Jody says. "She should at least have the decency to thank you."

"She has," Sam replies. "She thanked me in the alley where we landed. And she's thanked me a million times over in the past three days just by keeping my name out of the press. I mean, it's not like I came to Hell's Kitchen expecting to make any friends."

"You also didn't come to Hell's Kitchen by choice," Jody points out. "You said these girls were friends of Daredevil's?"

"Yeah," Sam says, biting his cheek.

"Well, you saved his life, too," Jody says sternly. "They should at least care about that." Sensing a lecture coming on, Sam quickly attempts to diffuse the situation.

"Jody, it's fine, really," He says, shaking his head. "I just... I don't want to talk about this right now, okay?"

"Fine," Jody says with a heavy sigh, and Sam finds himself smiling weakly. "Just... don't let Daredevil's friends get you down. You're a good person, Sam, regardless of what they think." Jody falls silent just as soft voices suddenly appear in the background of the call, and Sam strains his ears, trying to identify the intruders. When he registers a few words about clouds and strong winds, Sam realizes that Jody just turned on her TV.

"What's going on in the news?" He asks, figuring that if he's going to change the subject to anything, it might as well be the weather.

"Apparently, there's a chance of snow in Sioux Falls this Thursday," Jody says, sounding pretty annoyed. "It's the first day of April and they think there's going to be snow on the ground. Ridiculous." Jody's words are meant to be lighthearted but the unsaid implications strike Sam hard. It's April 1st. Sam first met Claire Temple on February 19th, which means it's been a month and a half since Sam's escape from the demons. It's also been almost exactly six months since the Lebanon explosion.

Six months since the day Sam's life ended.

"Oh, did you know that Sioux Falls is getting a new school?" Jody asks abruptly, apparently aware of Sam's rapidly spiraling thoughts.

"Really?" Sam replies, grateful for the subject change.

"Yes, an elementary. A lot of families with young kids have moved into town in the past couple of years, so they needed the space." Jody explains, hesitating. "It's going to be called Robert Singer Elementary." Sam's breath catches in his throat and Jody laughs. "Bobby Singer always wanted to
leave a legacy, but I don't think this is what he had in mind, huh?"

"Not at all," Sam says, letting himself laugh with Jody. He hesitates for a moment, then his smile widens when a particular thought enters his mind. "Bobby did always have a way with kids, though."

"Really? I never saw him as the fatherly type." Jody replies, confused.

"No, not a father. No way." Sam says immediately. "But he was one hell of an uncle."

"I'm sorry I never got to witness that side of him," Jody says solemnly, and Sam sighs.

"He was a good man, and he had a big heart," Sam says. "Even if he had some trouble showing it at times. I know my experiences with adult influences aren't exactly the best baseline, but Bobby was definitely the best uncle I had."

"And it's a good thing you had him," Jody says. "I can't imagine how differently you would have..." Jody trails off suddenly and Sam frowns, apprehension rising in his chest.

"What is it?" He asks, straining his ears. The only sounds he can hear on the other line are the faint voices on the TV and Jody's startled breathing.

"Do you have a TV or a laptop near you, something you can watch CNN on?" Jody asks abruptly.

"I can probably find a stream on my laptop, why?" Sam asks, growing more worried by the second.

"Turn it on, right now." Jody orders, sounding almost breathless. Sam tucks his phone between his shoulder and his ear and pulls out his laptop, heading to the CNN website and quickly locating a live broadcast. As the stream starts to load—Sam has been stealing the wifi from Karen's building, and he can't really get a stellar connection on the roof—Sam hears Jody calling for Alex and Claire.

"What is it?" Sam asks, exasperatedly hitting refresh when the page refuses to finish loading. "I'm on the CNN website but the live broadcast won't load."

"It's you, Sam," Jody says. "They said... They said they found you." Sam's heart sinks into his stomach and he looks around, mentally preparing for a helicopter to appear and drop a SWAT team on his head. Instead, the live broadcast finishes loading, and Sam finds himself staring at the image of a relief group in a disaster zone. After a minute, he realizes that it's a picture of Lebanon.

"--to the valiant efforts of the thousands of volunteers over the past six months." A woman's voice narrates over the picture. A few seconds later, the image is replaced by two anchors sitting behind a desk, both wearing the same uncharacteristically serious expression.

"For those of you who are just tuning in, we're currently awaiting an official statement from the FBI concerning new remains found in the disaster zone in Lebanon, Kansas." The male anchor says, and Sam bites down hard on the inside of his cheek as two pictures appear on the screen. They're both mugshots, one of Sam and one of Dean. The only difference is, Sam's mugshot is from 2008. Dean's is much more recent.

"It has been almost six months since a bomb placed inside a Biggerson's restaurant in Lebanon, Kansas killed 52 people and injured 96 more in one of the most devastating disasters in modern American history." The female anchor says. "Infamous serial killer Dean Winchester was arrested at the scene and it has long been suspected that his younger brother Samuel was also involved." Sam finds himself flinching involuntarily at both the use of his full first name and the
venomous tone with which the anchor says it. "The hunt for Samuel Winchester has been going on nationwide for the past six months. That hunt may now be over."

"Jody, what did they find?" Sam asks, swallowing hard. This may be the end of his freedom.

"I'm not sure," Jody admits. "I heard your name but then they started talking about the relief efforts. I think the search teams just started on a new street this morning, and they might have found a body that looks kind of like you."

"This just in: the director of the FBI has released an official statement concerning the remains that were found last month in Lebanon, Kansas." The female anchor says. A hand enters the shot from the right side, holding a paper out to the male anchor, who takes it, clears his throat, and begins to read.

"The FBI would like to inform the public of an important finding at the site of the bombing of Lebanon, Kansas on October 5, 2017." The anchor says, and Sam finds himself holding his breath in morbid anticipation. "On the morning of March 11, 2018, a severed limb belonging to a tall white male was found in the rubble and immediately transferred to the FBI regional headquarters in Kansas City. DNA testing was ordered immediately and those results have been confirmed as of the morning of April 1, 2018. It has been conclusively confirmed that the limb belongs to one Samuel Winchester. Due to the amount of trauma on the limb and other evidence found at the scene, the FBI has determined that Samuel Winchester was definitively present at the site of the Lebanon bombing and was subsequently killed in the explosion. Thank you." The female anchor begins to speak but Sam mutes the feed, staring at the picture of himself until it starts to blur.

He's dead. Sam Winchester is dead.

"Sam, are you okay?" Jody asks, her voice filled with an emotion Sam can't quite place.

"They found my leg." Sam realizes, shaking his head in disbelief. It never crossed his mind that his missing limb might one day be recovered, that it might have been torn from his body but otherwise remained intact. He certainly never thought that the severed limb would be the key to getting the FBI off of his trail.

"I know, Sam," Jody says, sounding uncertain.

"Jody, I'm dead. I'm safe." Sam says excitedly. "They think I died in the blast. They think that I'm dead. That means they won't be looking for me anymore."

"No, they won't." Jody agrees. "But that isn't entirely a good thing." Sam frowns, preparing to ask the sheriff what she means, but he gets his answer when Dean's mugshot reappears on the screen. There's no such thing as good fortune in the life of a Winchester, and this is just another piece of proof.

The only thing that was keeping Dean's case out of court was the fact that Sam was still in the wind.

And, as Sam recalls Claire Temple telling him that day in her apartment a month and a half ago, that was all Dean's doing. Dean was the only one who wholeheartedly believed that Sam was still alive, still out there somewhere, still unharmed. Still safe.

Sam has no way of telling his brother that he's been right this entire time.

The sun disappears behind a building as Sam ends the call and closes his laptop, head swimming with thoughts of everything that's happened in the past few months and everything that will
inevitably happen in the future.

And so Sam's break from the world ends in the same way that it began—in a sea of emotions. Sam is suddenly overwhelmed by relief and fear and grief and pain, and as he tries to sort through the mountain of conflicting feelings, he loses control of all of them. His eyes flicker and turn yellow, changing the hue of the sunset and lighting up the world around Sam, showing him the white souls of people in every building in Manhattan. The farther away they are, the less solid the figures become until they eventually turn into little spheres of light. And when Sam looks even further, he no longer sees individuals. Instead, the lights merge, creating a solid light that forms the image of the building the people are standing in. From here, Sam can see the skyline of Manhattan, a picture painted in the white glow of a million souls.

And as he begins to see the city, Sam begins to hear it as well, begins to hear the children begging for more time before bed, the businessmen arguing about their latest deals, the sirens of a faraway crime that no hero is there to help stop. And it hurts Sam to hear the city, to hear the children that he can't help and the crimes he can't stop and the people he can't save. But those sounds aren't the ones that hurt the most. Because Sam is suddenly made aware of another sound, much fainter than the rest but instantly familiar, instantly overwhelming. And that's the sound that breaks Sam completely.

Hundreds of miles away in a holding cell in Washington DC, Dean Winchester cries into his hands, body shaking as he finally allows himself to mourn the death of his baby brother.
Chapter 23

Sam can't remember the last time he woke without a nightmare following him into the light. He's
dreamt of terrible things since before Jessica Moore's death, but he supposes it wasn't until after his
time in Hell that the nightmares became a near-nightly occurrence. Now, with the Lebanon
bombing fresh on his mind, Sam finds himself woken by a carousel of memories each night.
Sometimes it's Hell, sometimes Jessica, sometimes Lebanon. But there's never a break. Never a
morning Sam doesn't wake up shaken to the core, wishing he could forget more than he already
has. Never a day when he isn't haunted by one of the many terrible experiences of his life.

When Sam wakes suddenly mere hours after the FBI officially declared him dead, the image
burned into his head is a remnant of the only nightmare he's had recently that isn't a memory: a
little girl in a pink dress. The girl's cry of pain as a bullet rips through her stomach and the
subsequent image of her soul disappearing into the heavens tear at Sam somewhere deep inside his
mind, deep inside his heart. He still has no idea who the girl is, no idea where she's from or what
she represents, but the deep-seated terror that accompanies her image—and the recurring
nightmare that that image appears in—tells Sam that whatever this girl is a part of, it's grave.

The girl may be a memory, a piece of Sam's past that the demons stole from him when they stole
his memories of the Lebanon bombing and the four months that followed. Sam already knows that
his memories from prior to the bombing were also affected—his lack of knowledge of what
happened to his mother and Castiel are evidence of that—and the idea that he could be missing
even more of his past is terrifying, especially if the girl is involved in some way.

Sam can only hope that whatever happened to the girl didn't follow the same plot as his dream.

As the girl fades away and Sam starts to truly wake up, he begins to wonder why he woke so
suddenly. It's clearly still dark out, no more than five hours after he fell asleep at sundown. And
while Sam historically doesn't have the easiest time falling asleep, once he's out, he's out—barring
unexpected intruders, Sam usually won't wake until sunrise.

But it's still far from sunrise—the moon is still high in the sky. So something else must have woken
Sam. Recalling the last time he was awakened so suddenly, Sam reaches for his burner phone—and
quickly discovers that the last call in the log is Jody's from a few hours ago. So what woke him up?

The only other explanation is that Sam is no longer alone on his rooftop.

The thought has barely crossed Sam's mind when he catches movement in the corner of his eye and
whirls around, lifting one palm and quickly freezing the intruder in place. The prowler is mostly
hidden by the wall of the roof-access door, so Sam is forced to carefully round the small obstacle
in order to get a good look at the trespasser.

To his surprise, Sam finds a sheepish Karen Page waiting on the other side, frozen in a near-
crouch.

Sam immediately drops his arm to his side and Karen catches herself on the wall, straightening and
dusting herself off, one hand almost instinctively moving toward her hair.

"Karen?" Sam asks, watching the reporter subconsciously twist a strand of blonde hair around her
finger. "What are you doing here?"

"I live in this building, Sam." Karen points out. "I have a right to use my own roof."
"But you haven't been," Sam replies with a frown. "In fact, you've been actively avoiding it for the past couple of days. Avoiding *me.*" Karen blushes lightly then nods, mimicking Sam's frown.

"Claire told me to give you some space." She admits. "She didn't want you to follow me to the clinic."

"Why?" Sam asks, his earlier resentment beginning to rise up. "I already know what Daredevil looks like, so unless his full name is written on a clipboard at the end of his bed, I don't see what harm there is in letting me see him," Sam told Jody that he understood why Claire and Karen did what they did, that he didn't mind, but that isn't true at all. Sam has started to develop a friendship with Daredevil, started to grow closer to the other vigilante. Daredevil saved Sam's life in that alley in the warehouse district, continued to help him even after discovering his name, his past, and his criminal record. Daredevil has saved Sam numerous times over the past month and a half—from others and from himself. No matter what Sam did, Daredevil was always there to help. And now, when Sam is finally able to return the favor, he can't. He can't be there for Daredevil because Claire won't let him. The same Claire who Sam thought was the first person to trust him.

He doesn't blame her. He can't. But that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt.

"I don't think there's any harm in letting you see him," Karen says. "But Claire does, and since she's the one keeping Daredevil alive right now, she gets to make that decision." Karen hesitates, twisting her hair more tightly around her finger. "She'll warm up to you eventually, I'm sure. She's friends with almost every vigilante in New York. You just happen to be the first one who is also wanted by the police."

"Well, the first one to be wanted by the police before Claire met them."

"And here I thought it was my awkwardness that pushed her away." Sam jokes halfheartedly, and Karen offers him a sympathetic smile in reply. "Well, if I can't see Daredevil myself, can you at least tell me how he's doing?" Karen nods, tugging at her lip with her teeth as she pointedly avoids Sam's eyes.

"Not good," Karen admits after a minute, wrapping her hair so tightly around her finger that the top starts to turn white—probably in an attempt to keep her hands from shaking. "He hasn't woken up yet, hasn't even moved. He's breathing on his own, which is good, but Claire is worried that he won't be able to forever. He doesn't seem to be getting any better."

"Does Claire know what's wrong?" Sam asks, concerned. He may not know Daredevil's name, may not know the first thing about him, but he still cares. Daredevil was the first person in Hell's Kitchen to offer Sam any amount of kindness, after all, and that's not something Sam will soon forget.

"She thinks there's some swelling in his brain," Karen says. "It looks like the Demon bashed his head into a wall a few times, knocked him around pretty good besides that. He's got three broken ribs, and two of the fingers on his right hand are broken, too. And of course, there's the bullet in his neck. Claire thinks the Demon fired a shot at his chest and Daredevil ducked but didn't get down fast enough. The Demon probably left him for dead." Sam nods, picturing the fight in his mind. Considering how much blood was pooled around Daredevil by the time Sam got there, the vigilante must have been shot around the same time that Sam teleported himself and Karen to the alley. Which means that Daredevil was fighting the Demon at the same time that Sam was fighting the Demon's men.

If there was any doubt left in Sam's mind that the attack on him and Karen was anything more than a distraction, it's gone now.
"I'm sorry I couldn't have been of more help," Sam says subconsciously, guilt rising in his throat as he rubs the back of his neck.

"There's nothing you could have done," Karen replies sternly, and Sam shakes his head, suddenly desperate to make someone understand why he cares so much about Daredevil's fate.

"I could ha– should have checked his head for any damage from the bullet in his cowl. I should have told Claire that I thought he might have had a concussion as soon as we got to her apartment." Sam explains, biting down hard on the inside of his cheek. "I would have done all of that. I would have..." Sam trails off, distractedly running the fingers on his right hand along the scar on his left palm. "But I just haven't been... thinking straight, recently. I keep forgetting things, important things, like Daredevil's concussion. I don't know why." It's an admission Sam wasn't entirely sure he was ready to make, even sure he could. Sam has always had trouble telling anyone when something is wrong—a trait he shares with his brother—but he's trying to improve, trying to be better. Being in Hell's Kitchen, away from everyone from his past, away from every thing from his past, is Sam's chance to fix everything that's been wrong with his life. Starting with this.

Starting with Daredevil and Karen.

"You were caught in a huge explosion six months ago and kidnapped shortly afterward." Karen reminds Sam, her voice filled with nothing but sympathy. "I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't have some kind of brain damage. Maybe you should talk to Claire about that." Sam hesitates, frowning.

"I don't think I should bother her with that right now." He says. Telling Karen—who, despite her avoidance, seems to be making an effort to help Sam—is one thing, but telling Claire is another one entirely. One thing from his old life that Sam has already changed is his willingness to trust. Despite everything that happened to Sam in the first 35 years of his life, he always trusted people, always gave them everything before he knew if their reasons were pure. Not even Hell could take that away from him. But the demons could. The demons took a lot of things from Sam—his leg, his memories, his freedom—but they also took something a lot worse. They took his trust.

Sam got a new leg, made more memories, earned his freedom. But he'll never get back that trust.

"Claire is busy with Daredevil," Sam continues, pushing back the emotions that threaten to overwhelm him, "and I've been dealing with... whatever is going on with my memories for a few months now. I'm sure I'll last a few more days." What Sam doesn't mention is that he has no intention of going to Claire in a few days, either, or even in a few weeks. While Daredevil and Karen and even Franklin Nelson have been trying their hardest to help Sam, to be kind to him, Claire has made it abundantly clear that Sam is not her friend or even close to it, and as long as Daredevil remains unconscious, the nurse will have her hands full with more important things. Maybe when Daredevil wakes up, Sam will approach Claire. Maybe. Or maybe he'll just pretend that everything is fine, refuse to open up just like he has his entire life. After all, Sam has certainly been through much worse than a little bit of forgetfulness.

"So, I saw that the FBI isn't searching for you anymore," Karen says, abruptly changing the subject. Sam nods distractedly, lingering on the topic of the injuries in Daredevil's mind and his own for a moment longer before forcing himself to change gears.

"As of April 1, 2018, Sam Winchester is officially dead," Sam says with a slightly more genuine smile. "Again."

"How many official deaths are you at now?" Karen asks curiously.
"I think this is my third," Sam says. "The explosion at the police station in Colorado 10 years ago was the first, then the whole situation in Iowa." He pauses, thinking back over the past decade and a half. "Fourth if you were to ask the Secret Service, I guess," Sam adds with a frown. For all he knows, there could be several more instances that have simply been erased from his memory.

"That sounds like an interesting story," Karen says, raising an eyebrow. Sam just chuckles, shaking his head.

"It is." He admits. "But a story that I don't think I should be telling at the moment." Sam knows that at some point, he's going to have to tell someone—most likely Daredevil—about the true story behind his official deaths and the charges on his rap sheet. But Sam also knows that other than Daredevil, he doesn't want any of his new acquaintances in Hell's Kitchen to know the truth. For the first time in years, Sam has found people he can be himself around, without them knowing about the supernatural world. He doesn't want to lose that.

"You're just like Daredevil." Karen comments. "Always keeping secrets." The joking accusation makes the smile drop from Sam's face and Karen shifts uncomfortably, obviously regretting the jab.

"So, you never did get around to telling me what you found out about the Demon," Sam says. Karen nods enthusiastically, sending Sam a look that conveys her gratitude for the subject change.

"On the roof, I was just going to tell you that I narrowed down the search. But yesterday I found his name. That's actually why I came up here." Karen explains, and Sam nods, urging her to continue. "The Demon's name is Norman Whitmore. He's 42, a businessman who works in Manhattan. Well, worked. He quit his job about five months ago." Karen pulls out her phone, showing Sam a picture of Whitmore. The man in the photo is half bald with greying hair and a shy grin on his face. He looks nothing like the confident demon Sam met in Maplewood, New Jersey, but this man is without a doubt the Demon. Or rather, possessed by the Demon. "Whitmore is practically living off the grid, by the way." Karen continues, starting to ramble slightly. "No social media presence, no cell phone in his name, not even a car. I could barely find anything on him, all I've got is his resignation letter from his last job and the resume he sent them when he started."

"What did that say?" Sam asks curiously.

"Well, Whitmore went to Boston College for business, got his Bachelor's." Karen reads from her phone. "He interned at Stark Industries for two years right out of college, then bounced from company to company. Never stayed in one place for more than three years, but it doesn't look like he was ever fired. Just quit."

"He probably wasn't happy with what he was doing, kept looking for somewhere he would enjoy his work," Sam suggests. "I doubt he ever found it."

"And five months ago when he quit his last job, he didn't get a new one, or maybe he just couldn't find one," Karen says. "And the Demon first showed up around five months ago, so the timeline fits. But how exactly does a bored businessman become a crime boss?"

"I don't know," Sam says with a shrug. He does know, of course—the Demon either possessed Whitmore and forced him to quit his job, or possessed him shortly afterward—but there's no way in hell he's going to tell Karen that.

"Thank you for your help," Sam says regretfully, "but I need to do the rest of this on my own." Karen crosses her arms, preparing to argue, but Sam just shakes his head. Karen cannot know the truth about the Demon. Sam can't let that happen. "Daredevil was already badly injured, Karen. I
can't let anyone else get hurt. This is my fight, and I need to do it alone." Karen looks like she's still going to argue, but a desperate look from Sam has her nodding and taking a step back in the direction of the roof-access door.

"I don't think you should take on the Demon alone, Sam, but I don't think I can stop you, either," Karen says. "And I've seen what you're capable of. You're a lot more powerful than Daredevil, but you're also a lot less experienced. Just... be careful, Sam." Karen pushes the strand of hair she's been twisting this whole time back behind her ear, smiling warmly. Sam returns the smile and nods gratefully.

"I'll try." He says, meaning every word. For Karen's sake, for Daredevil's sake, for New York's sake, Sam will try to be careful. Because if he loses the next fight, there's no telling what the Demon will do to the city and the people trying to protect it.

With one last smile, Karen disappears into her building. Sam waits a few moments before grabbing duffel bag and moving to another roof about two blocks away. Once he's certain that he's alone, Sam sets his bag down and pulls out his phone, dialing Jody's number.

"Hello?" Jody picks up on the second ring, sounding somewhat tired.

"Jody, it's Sam," Sam says, pausing as there's some shuffling on the other line.

"Oh, hi, Sam," Jody says, and Sam hears a door shut. "I was actually just about to call you."

"You were?" Sam asks, surprised.

"Yes, I have a case I wanted your opinion on," Jody explains. "But that can wait for a moment. Tell me what you need." Sam almost asks how Jody knows he needs something but he stops himself, biting the inside of his cheek. Thinking back, Sam can't recall a single time he called Jody just to check in. He only ever calls he when he needs something. He only ever calls anyone when he needs something.

That's another part of Sam's past that he'd really like to change.

"I just wanted you to know that Karen figured out who the Demon is possessing," Sam says. "His name is Norman Whitmore, 42. He's a businessman, bit of a recluse. If I email you a picture, could you send it to the right people, get it circulating? I'm trying to find the location of his home base."

"Definitely a kitsune, then," Sam confirms. "But you already knew that. So what do you need me for?"

"I was actually wondering if you could handle this case for me," Jody admits. "Claire is in Virginia hunting a vampire nest, and I need to deal with a series of break-ins from my day job. I've already called every hunter I know, but they're all already working on other cases. Full moon and all that." Sam bites his cheek, recalling with no small amount of trepidation the outcome of his last attempted hunt. Sensing Sam's hesitation, Jody sighs deeply. "I know you're trying to get out, Sam,
but this kitsune is showing no signs of stopping. If anything, they're increasing their pace. You're the only one I could call. I wouldn't have asked if I had any other options." The genuine regret in Jody's tone does an impressive job of piling on to Sam's rapidly building guilt. He used to be the first person Jody—or any hunter, really—would call for a hunt. Now he's the last choice for some, no choice at all for others.

Most of the hunters, of course, believe Sam Winchester to be dead—not necessarily as a result of the Lebanon bombing, certainly not as the cause of the bombing, but dead nonetheless. It's the only explanation for his absence, for his brother's extended stay in federal custody. Even the most optimistic of hunters would agree that Dean's current situation could only be the result of Sam finally meeting his fate. After all, while the Winchester brothers' hunts are well-known stories, the bond between them is the stuff of hunter legend.

And Jody is right. Sam is still helping people, still saving lives, but he's been actively avoiding the supernatural world. After the fiasco in Maplewood, Sam hasn't even tried to find another hunt in the area. And while he may be pretending that he's just scared of being too late, Sam knows that isn't true. He's trying to distance himself from his past, from the events that lead to Lebanon, to the demons, to Darkside. He's giving himself a second chance at a life without the supernatural world, saving people from monsters that can also be saved, monsters that are just as human as their victims. Sam is trying to get out, just like Jody said. He's trying one last time to escape his past, his demons.

But even if he's no one's first choice, even if he's trying to change his fate, at least some part of Sam is still Sam Winchester. That part of Sam that puts others before himself, that part of Sam that makes him run headlong into the action to save someone else's life, that part of Sam is Sam Winchester through and through. The poison in Sam's veins may have given Darkside his name, his power, but the hunter in Sam's soul is the one who gave Darkside his mission. Sam may not truly be Sam Winchester any longer, but he's still Sam. And Sam will never run away from someone in need.

"I'm in," Sam says, a ghost of a smile forming on his face. He pulls his duffel bag over his shoulder and teleports to the bus station, digging a crumpled twenty out of his bag—while Daredevil's supply of cash ran out a long time ago, Jody left a bunch of bills in Sam's bag after he got his new leg—and heading for the ticket booth. "I'll call you back when it's done." Sam hangs up the call and shoves his phone into his pocket, smiling at the woman in the booth. "One ticket to Madison, Connecticut, please."
Chapter 24

The problem with hunting alone, Sam is quickly reminded, is that there's no one to share the burden.

By the time Sam arrives in Madison, Connecticut early in the morning on April 2, the kitsune's body count has risen to five. By the time Sam has paid for his room at a local motel, the police chief has declared that there's a serial killer in Madison. By the time Sam opens his laptop, he has an alert informing him that the announcement is trending on Twitter.

With a rapidly diminishing timeframe—the more attention that's brought to the deaths, the more likely it is that a hunter will come to town; Sam knows from experience that the kitsune will most likely kill one or two more people in the next couple of days and then leave town—Sam quickly finds himself stretched thin, unable to simultaneously research the local lore, the victims, and possible suspects and also question the victims' families and any witnesses. Forced to focus on one thing at a time, Sam considers his options and decides to spend the day researching, and it pays off: by the time the sun sets, Sam is relatively confident that he's zeroing in on the kitsune's identity.

If he could, Sam would continue to work straight through the night, but by about 10 pm the words on the laptop are too blurry to read and Sam can barely even remember what city he's in. He's exhausted and probably on the verge of passing out—he didn't sleep at all last night other than the few hours he got in before Karen's appearance on the roof, thanks to his admittedly stupid but well-meant decision to catch the earliest bus to Madison and start working as soon as he sat down—but the only thing more insistent than Sam's brain is his stomach, so fifteen minutes later, Sam finds himself walking into a bar on the outskirts of Madison.

Although—thanks to the nagging part of Sam's mind that has been reminding him all day that he has bigger fish to fry back in Manhattan and shouldn't even be wasting his time with this kitsune in the first place—he does bring his laptop with him.

The ambiance of the bar is a strange comfort to Sam, drawing forth remnants of memories of hustling drunk frat boys out of their money and watching his brother unsuccessfully flirt with pretty girls. Sam has been to enough bars over the years to know that no two are exactly alike, but they all share the same sounds and smells and they're always filled the same kind of people: those who are hopeful and those who gave up on hope long ago. At one point in his life, Sam belonged to the former category, but for the past seven or so years—the post-Hell years, a voice in the back of his mind unhelpfully points out—he's firmly placed himself in the latter. Now, despite everything that's happened in the last six months, Sam couldn't say with confidence where exactly he fits in. He certainly doesn't feel as hopeful as he did in his youth, but he also has some hope for the future.

After pondering for a moment, Sam decides that he isn't on either end of the spectrum, but rather somewhere in the middle.

As with every other comparison Sam has considered as of late, he's in the grey zone. Lost in the middle of light and darkness.

"What can I get for you, man?" The bartender asks when Sam takes a seat at the bar, grabbing a few cashews from the bowl to his left and resting his forehead on his palm. He's had a near-constant headache since the incident on the rooftop five days ago, although he doesn't know if it's a result of his overuse of his abilities or a symptom of a minor concussion. Alcohol probably isn't the answer to Sam's problems—and it definitely won't help at all with the headache—but it will at least give him a more sane excuse.
"Whatever you've got," Sam says with a halfhearted wave of his hand, barely acknowledging the question as he tosses one of the cashews into his mouth. He should be focusing more on the bar, on the patrons—for all Sam knows, the kitsune could be in this room right now—but he can't seem to keep his mind from wandering, can't seem to keep himself from being distracted. Even with the threat the kitsune poses to the residents of Madison looming over him, Sam can't seem to stay focused on the task at hand. His thoughts are occupied by Norman Whitmore and Karen Page and Daredevil. All of the problems Sam should have left in Hell's Kitchen cling to him like burrs, digging shadowed claws into his mind and forcing their way into the deepest parts of his very being. He should be there right now, trying to find the Demon, not in another city in another state hunting monsters. Yet here he is.

Sam figures that he's acting very much like Dean, using a smaller hunt to distract himself from the bigger one.

"Here you are." The bartender says, pulling Sam from his thoughts and offering him a bottle. Sam nods, offering a halfhearted smile in thanks, grabbing another handful of cashews, and standing, heading for one of the booths in the corner of the room. He sets the beer down and pulls out his laptop, finding the picture Karen sent him—that part of Sam that didn't want him to leave New York was very vocal on the bus to Madison; Sam spent the ride on the phone with Karen, making sure she emailed him the photograph of Norman Whitmore—and forwarding it to Jody. After a moment's hesitation, Sam finds himself posting the image on the discussion board for his hacking class with a short caption explaining that the man in the photograph is a dangerous criminal who needs to be found as soon as possible. Sam doesn't trust his classmates with the full story—the idea of anyone else trying to confront the Demon and getting hurt even worse than Daredevil was sickens Sam to his stomach—but he has to admit that they'll probably have more luck finding the Demon than Sam would. After all, these are the same people who warned Sam about the attack at the convention center. If anyone can find the Demon's home base, it will be Andrew Smith and his friends.

Sam just hopes that Smith doesn't try to be a hero. He already knows what happens to hackers who try to save the world on their own. And the last thing Sam needs is another death on his conscience.

Popping another cashew into his mouth, Sam finds himself suddenly aware of how hungry he truly is. His meals in the past month and a half have been mediocre at best, consisting mostly of occasional indulgences into Claire Novak's supply of protein bars and sporadic visits to the coffee shop in the warehouse district where the barista—a shy brunette named Katy who attends a local university—has started slipping extra croissants into the bag whenever Sam orders to go. The last time Sam ate a real meal was when he had Chinese takeout at Claire Temple's apartment.

And yet, when it comes down to it, Sam isn't really that hungry.

He gets hungry, of course. His stomach growls and he gets the small pains typical of someone who wants sustenance. But it never gets any worse than that. Sam is hungry, sure, but he isn't ravenous, isn't losing weight or hair or health despite his insanely small caloric intake. And maybe it's just a side effect of the four months of starvation he most likely endured at the hands of the demons, but something tells Sam that that's not entirely the cause. Because when Sam drank demon blood, he was never quite as hungry. And he has a feeling that this is kind of the same thing.

The thought is absolutely terrifying, but Sam can't find anything that would prove the theory wrong.

Sam doesn't feel much like drinking but he takes a swig of his beer anyway, desperate for some
small relief from the demons in his mind. While in most cases, the alcohol would lower awareness, it does the opposite for Sam—the familiar taste of cheap beer flips some sort of switch in Sam's mind, wakes the hunter's instincts that at some point fell dormant.

The hairs on the back of Sam's neck rise and he suddenly finds himself trying very hard not to acknowledge the group of men standing around the pool table who are taking turns staring at him.

There was a risk, Sam supposes, of someone recognizing him. That will probably be a risk for the rest of his life. Sam Winchester will forever be associated with the bombing in Lebanon, and even if Sam is now officially dead, his face won't just suddenly disappear from everyone's minds. If anything, it will only show up more often. Now that Sam is supposedly dead, the conspiracy theories will really begin to fly, and the circumstances of Sam's 'death' will only fuel them. After all, a single leg is far from a guarantee of death, so someone is sure to suggest that Sam escaped the blast—and while that may be exactly what happened, it's a fact that Sam hopes the general public is never informed of.

A small, ever-optimistic side of Sam suggests that the men at the pool table could just be bar regulars forming opinions on the newcomer, that their stares are just an unfortunate coincidence that triggered Sam's anxiety. But when you're a wanted felon four times over and about half of the population of the world—human and otherwise—hates your guts, assuming anything could get you killed.

With that thought in mind, Sam attempts to get a better look at the men at the pool table, moving his eyes in a sweeping motion as if to survey the entire room—and actually doing so once he realizes that the watchful eyes aren't coming from the pool table alone but rather from all around him. Careful to avoid making eye contact with anyone, Sam's heart begins to sink as he identifies behaviors that he should have noticed much sooner, little mannerisms that set off warning bells in his mind.

The first thing that catches Sam's eye is the older man sitting at the table closest to the door. His back is angled toward the wall as if he were engaged in conversation with someone sitting directly beside him in the booth—but with no one else there, it instead appears that the man is keeping a close eye on the entire establishment. The pair of men around Sam's age who are standing next to the jukebox are talking quietly to each other, moving their hands somewhat aggressively. To the untrained eye, they would appear to be arguing over what song to play next or something else mundane, but Sam notices how both men tense whenever either man's hand strays too close to his belt. Even the bartender isn't so innocuous on a second glance, his hands clenched a little too tightly around the bottle he's holding and his eyes a little too stony as he observes the room in a similar manner to Sam.

On Sam's second examination of the room, he inadvertently makes eye contact with one of the men at the pool table, and his heart drops into his stomach as recognition flashes across the other man's face. Averting his eyes, Sam types absently on his computer, biting the inside of his cheek. This is bad. This is very bad. Because Sam recognizes the other man, too.

He's an old regular of the Roadhouse, a friend of Ellen's and someone Sam recalls as having gone on more than a couple of hunts with John Winchester back in the day. His name is Ronnie Matthews and he's a hunter, a hunter who Sam knows and a hunter who knows Sam, too. And the other men at the pool table, they're definitely friends of Matthews's, which makes them hunters. Something tells Sam that every pair of eyes currently burning holes into his back belongs to another hunter.

This bar that Sam walked into, it isn't a bar. It's a hunters' dive. Another Roadhouse, a new
Roadhouse.

Which means that every single person in this room knows exactly who Sam is, has known probably since he walked in the door.

Hunters are generally private people. They avoid each other if at all possible, only meeting up if they need more hands on a hunt. Hunters’ dives aren’t for making friends, they’re for finding contacts, people to call when you’ve stumbled upon a nest of fifteen vampires and you’re smart enough to know that you can't take them on your own—people who will lie to your family if you go on a hunting trip one day and never make it back. John Winchester used to frequent the Roadhouse for that very reason, but once Dean started to act as his partner, they stopped visiting. And since Sam and Dean were already a team of two, they rarely needed outside help—so after the Roadhouse burned down, they never bothered to find the new meeting place. It became a fact that Winchesters were out of bounds. You didn't ask John Winchester or his boys for help on a hunt. You went through the proper channels, talked to a guy who knew a guy who knew Bobby Singer or Jody Mills, hoped that the message eventually got to the boys and that they eventually took care of it. You never worked with them. And if you did, you rarely lived to talk about it.

Every hunter in the country knows that Sam Winchester is not someone you want to mess with. If Sam wants to get out of this bar without any injuries—to himself or to anyone else—he's going to have to milk that fact for all it's worth.

The issue is that up until about five minutes ago, everyone in this room thought that Sam Winchester was dead as a doornail. And if even one person in this bar thinks that he still is, Sam won't be making it out alive, much less unscathed.

Fully aware now of the eyes tracking his every move, Sam closes his laptop, shoving it into his back and standing. He grabs his beer and downs the remaining alcohol in one swallow, then heads over to the bar, setting the empty bottle down in front of the bartender and throwing a crumpled bill down beside it.

"Keep the change," Sam says as gruffly as he can, turning and heading for the door. He channels as much John Winchester as he can into every step he takes, hoping to unnerve the other hunters as much as possible. One unfortunate side effect of Sam's little show of dominance is that he's practically screaming that he made the hunters, that he knows exactly where he is and who he's with. It's a risk, but he's hoping that the benefits outweigh the consequences. For the most part, Sam's plan seems to work—no one bothers to hide their staring, but no one makes any move to stop him, either. That is, until one of the men at the jukebox shifts to his right, subtly blocking Sam's exit. It's a challenge, not just for Sam but for everyone in the room. Sam pulls to a stop, unsurprised to immediately find himself at the center of a twenty-person staring contest.

Every single hunter in the country has their own opinion on the Winchester brothers, and every single hunter in this bar has their own opinion on what a dead-and-alive-again Sam Winchester is doing in a hunter's dive in Madison, Connecticut. And every single one of them wants to know which of their opinions is the right one. Sam doesn't know what's going on in the minds of every hunter in this room, but he can hazard a guess, and he doesn't like what he's thinking one bit.

Most hunters don't have much in the way of a formal education, but that doesn't mean they're stupid. If you want to kill monsters for a living and actually keep on living, you can't be stupid. Sam figures that these hunters have already thought through all of the possible explanations for his sudden reappearance, and they've probably come to three main conclusions.

Option one: Sam is just Sam. You don't get to become hunter legend by living to tell the tale, you become hunter legend by dying and coming back to tell it. The Winchester brothers are famous for
two things: for killing the monsters that can't be killed and for being the hunters that keep coming back to life. There's no doubt in Sam's mind that the hunters in this bar know about his tendency to die and inevitably turn up again a few months later, ready to take down whatever monster dealt the final blow—if his brother hasn't done it first. And a few of these hunters probably assume that that's the case here—that Sam really did die in the Lebanon bombing, or sometime before it, or sometime after, and he's just found himself back from the dead for the eighth or ninth time. But not all hunters are that optimistic, and there's a high chance that the ones who aren't think Sam's fate fell to something a lot more sinister.

Which leads to option two: Sam did die, just not all the way. Another thing hunters are no stranger to is ghosts, and since the recipe for a phantom is a gruesome death and some serious unfinished business, it's no surprise that hunters make up a pretty good proportion of the world's population of Caspers. If these hunters believe that Sam did die, they probably assume that he died bloody, and he's already got some pretty obvious unfinished business: Dean. Six months is a pretty short time for a ghost to be able to become corporeal, but if Dean's imprisonment were Sam's unfinished business, there's probably some hunters here that believe that putting a ghost with prior knowledge of how the spirit plane operates on a timeline would be a good way to accelerate his learning. But that still wouldn't explain Sam's presence in this bar—if ghost-Sam was tied to any object, which given the circumstances would be pretty likely, it certainly wouldn't have found its way to a hunters' dive in Connecticut.

Of course, there's always option three: Sam isn't Sam at all. Maybe Sam Winchester did die six months ago, and a ghoul or a shapeshifter decided it would be fun to scare some other hunters by walking around wearing his face. Or maybe Sam never met his end at all and was instead possessed by a demon, is still possessed right now. It would explain his disappearance, Dean's arrest, even Lebanon: if Sam was possessed pre-explosion, he could have truly been the one to set the bomb.

Sam can easily disprove the ghost theory just by opening one of the bar's salt shakers—there's a disproportionate number of them scattered around the room, further proving that this is indeed a hunters' dive—but the demon one is where he's going to encounter some issues. While Sam is by no means a demon, he's definitely no longer entirely human, either, and thanks to his current situation, he hasn't had time to test where those boundaries lie. Sam already knows that he has an adverse reaction to holy water, but he also knows that devil's traps have no effect on him. The two main tests for demons and Sam somehow manages to both pass and fail.

There's that grey area again.

What Sam needs to decide—what Sam needs more time to decide—is what he wants the entire hunting community to think. Does he want the hunters to know that he's alive, or does he want to maintain the illusion of his death? The question has barely crossed Sam's mind before the answer becomes clear.

Sam can't let these hunters think he's alive.

Hunters may be the carriers of the world's best-kept secret, but they aren't very good at keeping anything else under wraps, especially from each other. If the hunters in this bar know that Sam Winchester is alive, the entire hunting community will, and if all of the hunters know, it won't be long before that information spills into the supernatural world. And the second the monsters find out that Sam Winchester isn't dead, they'll start telling everyone who will listen. It doesn't matter if humanity believes them. Just the prospect of Sam being out there somewhere will but the FBI firmly on his ass once again, and this time, they won't stop looking until they find a body.
Without altering his expression in the slightest or even so much as acknowledging any of the hunters in the bar, Sam heads to the door, walking smoothly around the hunter trying to block his way without a backwards glance. Once he's reached the open door, Sam pauses, running through his options one more time and deciding that he has no other choice. If the world finds out that Sam Winchester is alive, Sam will never be able to save his brother.

With that thought in mind, Sam teleports back to his motel room, leaving twenty hunters behind to stare at an empty doorway.
Chapter 25

Sam isn't entirely sure where he is, but he thinks it's a bank.

There's a wide array of smartly dressed people milling about, standing and sitting around and talking to each other—a familiar scene in most office buildings—but there is also a team of armed guards and a long desk with glass walls extending up to the ceiling, and the whole place is dripping with that strange aura that surrounds a group of people who are all fully aware of how much money is hidden just out of view. So yeah, probably a bank.

With that bit sorted, Sam moves on to another, slightly more important issue: how exactly he ended up in a bank in the first place. He doesn't remember coming back to Manhattan—and the people all around him in their pencil skirts and clean-pressed suits scream Wall Street, so he must be in Manhattan—doesn't even remember leaving Madison. That, unfortunately, isn't entirely surprising. Sam's memory hasn't exactly been stellar as of late, and if someone were to tell him that he rode the bus back from Madison yesterday and stopped two crimes along the way, he would probably be inclined to believe them. Sam's sudden arrival in Manhattan isn't the issue so much as the fact that he's in a bank. Sam has never had reason to go to a bank before, and considering the alarming frequency at which his face appears on various news networks around the country these days—and the fact that Sam somehow has less money now than he did last September—he as absolutely no reason to start going to the bank now. So there must have been something that led Sam to this bank.

If only he could remember what it was.

The bank's door opens and Sam turns, watching as a tall Asian man in a navy blue suit walks into the lobby, holding a briefcase in one hand and the small, slender hand of a little girl in the other. The girl is wearing a light pink dress and her long, straight black hair is tied back with a matching ribbon. She's no more than five years old, and her eyes are as bright as her smile as she follows the man who must be her father up to one of the bank tellers. She looks around at the other bank visitors with wide eyes, and when her eyes meet Sam's for a split second—she passes over him as if she doesn't even see him, which is slightly alarming—a confusing mix of déjà vu and terror washes over him.

The little girl looks strikingly familiar, but for the life of him Sam can't figure out why.

Sam watches the girl for another few minutes, watches as she loosens her hold on her father's hand in order to turn around and smile at the woman standing in line behind her, watches as her father grabs her hand all the more tightly. Sam watches her father finish his business and turn around, watches him lead the little girl toward the door. And then he watches as the door opens and a man in a black jacket and a black mask grabs the girl's other arm with a hand covered by a black glove, ripping her away from her father.

And then, then Sam finally recognizes her.

This is the little girl from his dream. Which means that this scene that's playing out right before his eyes is what happened—is happening, will happen—to her.

The man pulls a gun out of his pocket, waves it around the room, points it at the girl's head. He says something about how much money he wants in exchange for her life, adds some stupid line about nobody getting hurt if he gets what he wants. It's a lie, all of it is a lie, and Sam finds his feet moving of their own accord, pulling him toward the man. Only then does Sam realize that he's
wearing a black jacket and black gloves and a black mask, just like the man pointing a gun at a five-year-old girl's head. Except Sam's jacket is fake leather and his gloves came from a gas station and his mask doesn't cover his entire face, only his mouth.

And then the little girl whimpered—Sam doesn't hear it but he sees the way her lip quivers, sees the tears in her eyes—and Sam blinks and the world turns yellow, and the little girl and the masked man both glow white. The man is so surprised to see Sam—or maybe angry, probably angry—that he loosens his hold and the girl breaks free and starts running, starts running toward Sam and toward her father and away from the masked man with the gun that he's lifting, that he's aiming. And the man smirks and his finger twitches and an explosion rocks the entire bank—and Sam doesn't hear that, either, but he doesn't need to because he feels it—and everyone freezes, the masked man and Sam and the little girl's father and the little girl, and everyone in the room looks at the little girl's dress at the same time and they all watch together as a little red patch appears over her stomach and starts to grow, staining the light pink dress red. And the little girl falls and Sam screams but no sound comes out even though his vocal cords strain. And Sam runs at the masked man and everything gets brighter and the man pulls the trigger again but this time, the red stain blooms on Sam's shirt. And he screams again but it's drowned out by the pounding of his heart in his ears—and it's still not a noise, just a feeling, but it buries his screams nonetheless—as he falls down beside the girl. And he watches hopelessly as the white glow of her soul fades away. And after a minute so does everyone else's.

And then Sam opens his eyes and finds himself lying in a motel room in Madison, Connecticut, and some little piece of him says that this wasn't something that happened, or even something that's happening right now. The little girl who has been haunting Sam's dreams ever since he escaped the demons a month and a half ago is alive right now, but she won't be for long. Sam's dreams, Sam's nightmares, they aren't memories, they're premonitions. But somehow, that isn't even the most surprising thing Sam has just realized.

All this time, Sam thought he had to save that little girl, thought he had failed to save her. But now he knows that that isn't entirely true. Sure, he's being shown her death, but that isn't what his vision is warning him about. It's his.

All this time, Sam has been having visions of his own death.

As a dull pain resounds in Sam's chest, he prays that when the time comes, he finds a way to save them both.

Before he has time to sink further into what-ifs and maybes, Sam's burner phone rings on his nightstand and he pushes himself into a seated position, rubbing his face with one hand and grabbing the phone with the other. He answers the call without looking at the number, wedging the phone between his shoulder and his chin as he runs a hand through his hair, looking around for a clock.

"Sam." He says out of habit, sorting through his scattered thoughts that are still showing him bits and pieces of his nightmare, his vision. He finally locates a clock on the far wall of the room and as soon as the hour hand comes into focus, he suddenly finds himself much more awake.

It's almost 5 o'clock, 5 in the afternoon if the sunlight shining through the window is any indication. Sam slept through most of the day and didn't even realize it. Didn't he set an alarm?

Sam looks back at the nightstand and discovers that the alarm clock is dented in on top and clearly no longer functional. Did he destroy it during his vision, or during some forgotten nightmare he had before it?
"Sam, are you alright?" A familiar yet foreign voice asks, drawing Sam's attention back to the call. It takes him a second to organize his thoughts enough to put a name to a voice, but as soon as he does, his eyes widen.

"Alex?" He asks, surprised to be hearing from Jody's second adopted daughter. "What's up?"

"Jody and Claire told me that they ran into you in New York, gave me this number. They also mentioned that you don't have access to most of your weapons." Alex explains. "So when I saw what was happening on the news, I thought I'd call, make sure you were okay." The tone of Alex's voice suggests that she's beginning to regret her call, but Sam is more concerned with what she said than her potential embarrassment.

"Wait, what do you mean?" He asks, nearly falling out of the bed in his hurry to get to his laptop.

"Aren't you in Manhattan?" Alex asks, confused, and Sam shakes his head before cursing quietly. Of course, she wouldn't know.

"No, I'm in Connecticut right now on a hunt for Jody," Sam explains. He should have realized that Alex wouldn't have known that—the brunette has been so insistent on leaving the supernatural behind that it isn't likely that Jody keeps her updated on any hunts other than her own and Claire's.

"Oh, thank god," Alex says, sounding extremely relieved—which only serves to worry Sam more. Whatever is going on in Manhattan must be pretty bad if Alex is this concerned. Sam opens his laptop and heads to the website for the CNN, hoping to find live updates on whatever situation is happening in Manhattan. Finding nothing, Sam turns back to the call for help.

"What exactly is going on in Manhattan?" He asks.

"You know that new supervillain guy, the Demon?" Alex asks.

"Yeah, we've met," Sam replies. "He's been pretty quiet lately, though."

"Well, he's not being so quiet anymore," Alex says. "One of his men held up a bank this morning, and according to the Daily Bugle, another one did the same thing last week. Both times, a guy in a black ski mask walked into the bank, grabbed some innocent and put a gun to their head, and demanded as many unmarked bills as the tellers could gather in five minutes. After the time was up, the guy took the money and split. No one has been injured so far, but the guy today made away with almost $100,000."

"A string of bank robberies?" Sam thinks out loud, frowning. "Why would the Demon rob banks?" Alex, apparently aware that the questions are rhetorical, stays quiet, letting Sam puzzle through her story.

The Demon doesn't need to rob banks—he can teleport in and out before anyone notices anything amiss. So why go so public? The only thing that makes sense to Sam is that it isn't about the money at all.

"Wait, why are you worried about me?" Sam asks, a plausible theory forming in his mind. "I haven't exactly been known to frequent banks."

"Well, the public has kinda been thrown into a panic," Alex explains. "Daredevil and Darkside didn't show up to stop either robbery, and enough money is being stolen that people are starting to wonder if their assets are safe. After the robbery this morning, a bunch of people swarmed the bank that was attacked and started closing out their accounts. There were at least two stampedes and several people were injured. One was a tall guy with a prosthetic leg."
So the Demon's play isn't the money, it's the panic. He knows that Daredevil is out of commission, probably knows that Sam left town, so he's staging these attacks because he wants to incite panic. With the general public panicking in the streets, the police will be occupied with them—and with Daredevil and Darkside conveniently absent, there's no one to stop the Demon from putting his real plan into motion, whatever that may be. The money he gets from the robberies is probably just a bonus.

"Trust me, Alex, if I'm ever taken to a hospital, the cops will be waiting for me in the parking lot," Sam says with a frown—he was trying to be reassuring, but that is actually a real concern. If he were to get injured publicly and someone called an ambulance, it would be in the news as soon as a cop or a paramedic realized that Sam was, well, Sam. If Sam ever does get seriously injured, he's going to have to teleport away before anyone reaches him—or risk arrest.

"I'm just glad you're okay," Alex says, and Sam is surprised to find a smile forming on his face.

"Thanks for checking up on me." He says with as much earnestness as he can muster. "Tell Jody and Claire that I'm okay, would you? I'll be sure to call if anything does happen."

"Sure you will," Alex says doubtfully, sighing. "Bye, Sam. See you around, I hope."

"See you around."

A soft click tells Sam that Alex has ended the call and he drops his phone onto the bed, heading to the Bulletin's website on his laptop and finding their article about the first robbery. The eyewitness reports match up with what Alex said. A man in a black mask grabbed an innocent—in this case, a young woman who had apparently just started working on Wall Street a few days before—and threatened to kill her if the bank tellers didn't give him as much money as they could. The article doesn't mention any connection between the man and the Demon—confirmed or theorized—but it was also published the same day as the robbery, so that piece of information may not have been discovered yet. What bugs Sam about the robbery is that he had no idea that it even happened. He gets that he missed this one, but the first robbery took place five days ago, long before Sam left Manhattan—so he should have at least known about it after the fact. But he didn't.

Because the robbery happened the day after Karen's fall, the day after Daredevil was shot. It happened the day that Sam stopped going out as Darkside, the day he chose instead to hide on Karen's roof and pretend that the rest of the world would ever just stop and let him sort out his emotions. And because Sam took that break, because he hid away and decided it wasn't worth it to try, one of the Demon's men was able to rob a bank and take thousands of dollars. And today, Sam failed to stop another robbery, another of the Demon's men, because he was in another city in another state, sleeping in until 5 in the afternoon and trying to kill a kitsune and worrying about what a bunch of hunters think of him.

Sam knows that he can't waste another day in Madison. There's no telling when one of the Demon's men will strike again, will hold another innocent man or woman or child hostage. And there's no telling when a robbery will go wrong and someone will get hurt or even killed.

There's no telling when Sam's nightmare-vision will come to pass.

Sam has to get back to New York as soon as he can, has to bring Darkside back into the city. Has to protect Hell's Kitchen and all of Manhattan in Daredevil's absence and give the people of New York their hope back. He can't leave the public in a panic.

Sam closes the Bulletin's website and finds a local headline staring him in the face.
He can't leave the people of Madison in a panic, either. They think there's a serial killer in their midst, and for all intents and purposes, there is. There's a monster in Madison, and Sam can't just let it keep killing.

Sam has to figure out who this kitsune is, has to take care of them, and then he can go back to Manhattan. Except that even if Sam finds the kitsune's identity, he doesn't have any weapons to do the job with.

But, Sam realizes, he knows someone who does.

As he dives into his research—the faster Sam finds the kitsune, the faster he can go back to New York—a plan starts to form in Sam's mind.
Chapter 26

It takes six hours of non-stop research, but Sam finds the kitsune.

Her name is Kathryn Carbin and she's a pediatrician, a sweet-looking woman of 35 years with the kind of face that kids always seem to immediately trust—and in turn, the kind that parents trust, too. She doesn't look like a monster capable of killing five people in ten days but, then again, most monsters don't. And while Carbin may seem innocent at first glance, digging deeper reveals a much darker story—the kitsune's four male victims were all ex-boyfriends of Carbin's who each broke it off with her after claiming that she had grown somewhat uncomfortably obsessed, while the fifth was a woman who went to high school with Carbin and, according to her Facebook posts, married Carbin's high school sweetheart.

Sam knows that he can't take Carbin on himself—after all, the only weapons he has are a Bic lighter, telekinesis, and maybe his laptop if he were to throw it hard enough—but he also knows that he can't just walk into the hunters' dive, give someone the kitsune's name, and expect her to be taken care of. It's been over 24 hours since Sam left the bar in the least human way possible, and there's no doubt in his mind that every hunter who was present has long since taken a side. If Sam returns now, he's going to have to be prepared for anything. Luckily, Sam's six hours of research led to another development—a workable plan for what he'd do once he found the kitsune's identity. Step 1: Make an attention-grabbing arrival. Step 2: Talk to Ronnie Matthews. Step 3: Don't die.

Armed with a card upon which Carbin's name and home address are scrawled—as well as a short explanation of who she is and what she's done, signed S. Winchester—Sam teleports back to the hunters' dive. He can't say that he's surprised to find several guns pointed at his chest upon his arrival.

"Sam Winchester." One of the hunters from the pool table says, stepping forward as if to designate himself the official speaker of the group. Sam nods in acknowledgment before turning to survey the room. As he expected, the same twenty hunters from yesterday are present, standing around the room in such a way that they would look unimposing to the untrained eye. Sam, however, is far from untrained, and he can clearly see the men positioned in front of each exit, blocking Sam in. He can also see the obvious divide in the room. Half of the men—including the designated speaker and the man who blocked Sam's path yesterday—are holding the guns that are currently aimed at Sam. The other half—including the bartender and Ronnie Matthews—are unarmed, or at least refraining from actively pointing their weapons at Sam. Matthews' position directly to the right of the speaker suggests to Sam that he's the leader of the second group.

It's pretty clear to Sam which group he's the most likely to make any headway with.

"Sam?" Matthews tries after it becomes clear that Sam won't give the other speaker a verbal response. Sam smiles, lifting his right hand in a small wave. He knows that his best chance at getting the kitsune taken care of and getting himself out of the hunters' dive alive is to convince the hunters that he's still Sam Winchester—and since Sam knows that every hunter here saw him disappear into thin air last night, being Sam Winchester, human is out of the question. So instead, Sam is going to try the next best thing—convincing the hunters that he's a ghost, a stubborn but sane remnant of the Sam Winchester that once was. The vast majority of freshly-corporeal ghosts tend to be more of the silent, brooding type, so in order to sell the part, Sam is planning on remaining silent if at all possible.

Hence the note with the kitsune's name.
"Winchester, you must know that we're curious." The gun-wielding speaker says, and Sam turns to Matthews, cocking his head to one side and asking a silent question.

"This is Bruce Marshall," Matthews informs Sam, who nods and smiles gratefully. Marshall, for his part, shifts his grip on his gun, aiming at Sam's forehead rather than at his chest. Sam has actually heard the name Bruce Marshall before, even if he's never met the other hunter in person. Sam recalls Marshall to be far on the right of the hunter scale, firmly a member of the 'shoot first and ask questions later' breed, willing to resort to cruel and generally frowned upon means to kill their monster—the type of hunter who, as Dean once put it, cares a little too much about the 'hunting things' bit of the unofficial slogan and not enough about the 'saving people'.

With the identity of the designated leader of the 'shoot first' hunters sorted, the rest of the details begin to fall into place. It comes as no surprise to Sam that Marshall and Matthews were elected the speakers for their respective groups. Ronnie Matthews and Bruce Marshall are both seasoned hunters, two of the survivors of the age that John Winchester, Bobby Singer, and Bill Harvelle were a part of. Matthews and Marshall have seniority in this bar filled with fresh faces, seniority not just over their companions but over Sam. Sam wouldn't be shocked to see at least one of them try to use it.

"You human?" Marshall asks in a tone that suggests Sam will meet a swift end regardless of his answer. Unable to answer truthfully—and frankly, unwilling to put much thought into his response—Sam just shrugs. Marshall isn't who Sam is concerned with at the moment—it isn't likely that the 'shoot first' hunters will actually go after Carbin should Sam request it. "Ghost?" Marshall stubbornly continues, and Sam shrugs again, a smirk pulling at the corner of his lips as the older hunter begins to get visibly frustrated. "Why are you here? Why vanish for six months just to show up out of the blue in Connecticut?" Sam shrugs once more then, growing bored with the interrogation stream of questions—as amusing as it is to irritate Marshall, Sam does actually have a job to do—digs into his pocket. The armed hunters stiffen, raising their weapons conspicuously, and Sam just smiles, pulling out the card with the kitsune's personal information on it. Once it's clear that Sam isn't drawing his own gun, Matthews steps forward and accepts the card that Sam drops into his hand with a nod. Matthews steps back to stand beside Marshall as he skims over the information on the card, and after a minute his eyes widen.

"Hey Peterson, remember that kitsune that's been causing you trouble?" Matthews asks, directing the question to the bartender who gave Sam his drink last night. The bartender—Peterson, apparently—nods, stepping out of the ring of hunters in order to get a better look at the card Sam gave to Matthews. "Winchester here just gave me her name."

"You're telling me that Sam Winchester is hunting monster from beyond the grave?" Marshall asks incredulously—despite the fact that Sam never actually answered his question, the hunter seems to have made his own inferences—and Matthews shrugs. Sam smirks, nodding and gesturing to the card once more. He offers Matthews a curious look and mimes slitting his own throat, and Matthews just nods, returning Sam's smile for the first time.

"Well, we'll have to check your work, of course, Sam," Peterson says, and Sam nods in understanding—he's lucky any of the hunters are even willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. "But assuming you're right, I agree with Matthews. This kitsune has been a thorn in my side for the past week, and now we can finally take care of her. Thank you." Satisfied that the kitsune will be taken care of, Sam nods again, smiling warmly at Matthews and offering a one-finger salute. He pictures his motel room in his mind, preparing to teleport away, but he's stopped abruptly when
Marshall shoots forward and wraps a hand around Sam's very solid—and very not ghost-like—arm. And just like that, Sam's plan has gone out the window. Luckily, Sam Winchester is nothing if not overly prepared, and he did come with a Plan B. It's just one he really hoped he could avoid.

"Very ghost-like of you, Sam," Marshall observes, tightening his grip on Sam's upper arm. Sam drops the quiet ghost demeanor and scowls, letting his eyes flash yellow for a moment—long enough for the hunters to recognize the distinct coloration of a Prince of Hell's eyes but not quite long enough for anyone to notice that Sam still has pupils. Marshall jerks back like he's been shocked and a much more sinister smirk develops on Sam's face as he turns to Matthews.

"That kitsune has killed five innocent people," Sam says to the shocked hunter, ignoring the nine guns still pointed at him—Marshall dropped his in his panic, much to Sam's amusement. "She needs to be taken care of."

With the ghost idea foiled, Sam has to turn to another plausibility—one that's a lot easier to prove. And, thanks to Dean's escapades with the Mark of Cain, it's common knowledge among American hunters that it's possible for someone to die and come back as a demon within hours, still themselves minus some key traits. So Sam doesn't get to be a friendly hunter's ghost. He can still be Sam. And he can still get his intended message across loud and clear.

At least this way, Sam doesn't have to worry about anyone trying to find and burn his bones.

"You're a demon," Matthews says angrily. "Pretending to be Sam Winchester."

"Not pretending," Sam replies, still smirking. "I am Sam Winchester. Just... new and improved."

"With the eyes of a Prince of Hell." Peterson points out, and Sam shrugs. Let them think what they will. All Sam needs to do is make sure they know that he's still him.

"I'm not here to kill anyone," Sam says. "I'm here to get someone to kill that damn kitsune so that I don't have to deal with her. I have more important things on my plate right now," He turns to Matthews, staring him down. "Demon or not, I'm still a hunter." There's a challenge in Sam's expression, daring Matthews to tell Sam Winchester that he isn't a hunter, that he can't be a hunter. Matthews doesn't take the bait.

Marshall does.

"A demon hunter who is also a demon." The loud-mouthed hunter says skeptically, raising an eyebrow.

"Not all demons are evil," Sam says—and sure, the vast majority of them are, but Sam can't possibly believe that the whole species is evil when he can still clearly remember the small, brave demon who fell in love with an angel. "I may have yellow eyes and some fun new powers, but I'm still Sam Winchester."

"I'll be the judge of that," Marshall says, taking the gun from the hunter standing to his left and firing without warning. Sam simply teleports a few feet to the right, and the bullet flies between the heads of two hunters across the room, burying itself in the far wall just beside the jukebox. Peterson scowls, grumbling under his breath about having to fix the hole.

"I'm still Sam Winchester," Sam repeats, putting a significant amount of venom into his tone this time. "Which means that you still don't want to get in my way." Marshall raises the gun again and Sam—who at this point just wants to get out of here without any injuries—just lifts one hand, swiping it to the right and tearing the gun from Marshall's grasp. The weapon flies across the room
and lands harmlessly in a booth and Sam smirks, turning back to Matthews and Peterson. "Take care of that kitsune." He orders before pausing and considering for a moment.

Sam Winchester the demon. If that leaves this room and spreads to any creatures of supernatural origin, the monsters probably won't tell the human world. And even if they do, no one will believe them.

Maybe Plan B will actually work out better in the long run.

"If any of you try to seek me out, try to challenge me, try to kill me, then I won't hesitate to take care of you," Sam says, letting as much demonic fervor leak into his tone as he can. "And let's keep this little encounter between us, okay?" He adds as an afterthought, smiling sweetly at Marshall.

With his final warning still hanging in the air, Sam sends Matthews the most sincere grin he can muster and teleports back to his motel room. He packs his duffel in less than a minute, pays for his room, and heads straight to the bus station, purchasing a ticket for the next bus to Manhattan.

When Sam opens his laptop the next morning on a rooftop in Hell's Kitchen, there's an online article about Kathryn Carbin's untimely death waiting for him.
For a full week after Sam's return to Manhattan, he dedicates his time to thwarting the Demon's plans. He canvasses the city day and night, watching over as many banks as he can for as long as he can and waiting, waiting for a man in a black mask to attack, to take a hostage, to get thousands of dollars from terrified bank tellers, and to disappear without a trace.

And for a full week after Sam's return to Manhattan, he remains one step behind. Each time a robbery takes place, Sam arrives on the scene just in time to watch the latest masked man disappear into a black van and vanish into the city.

While trying to stop the attacks, Sam begins to discover limits to his abilities. He quickly learns that he can't teleport into most of the banks that are being robbed and is forced to run inside from the street instead—and those precious seconds wasted fighting through the crowd are often all the masked man of the day needs to make his escape. Sam can teleport into the banks after the fact, though, and while at first, he thinks that the Demon has something to do with his inability to teleport, he realizes after the fourth robbery that that isn't the case—Sam's teleportation depends on his ability to picture his destination, so he can't teleport to places he hasn't been before, places he can't picture in his mind.

The day after the fourth robbery, Sam canvasses all of Hell's Kitchen, making sure to step foot on every rooftop and in every alleyway. Then he visits every bank on the island of Manhattan, taking the time to look around at each one. None of the banks look like the one from Sam's vision, much to his chagrin.

A full week after Sam's return to Manhattan, the public is on edge. The Demon's men have successfully robbed five banks across the city in two weeks, taken almost a million dollars in unmarked bills. Whatever the Demon is planning, whatever he needs the money for—and by now, Sam is certain that he's going to use the money for something—he must be close to getting it. Which means that Sam has to be prepared for the next robbery, has to be in the bank before the attack happens, because the next attack could be the last. If he doesn't act now, Sam could lose his only chance to take down at least a portion of the Demon's operation.

After five attacks on increasingly wealthy, increasingly secure, increasingly public banks in Manhattan, there's one place left for him to rob. Only one logical place for him to go. So on the morning of April 10, a full week after Sam's return from Madison and ten days after the first robbery, Sam finds himself walking into the lobby of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and taking a seat on a plush gray couch—a position strategically chosen ahead of time in order to guarantee that none of the security cameras in the lobby have a clear view of Sam's face. Sam is wearing Darkside's signature jacket and gloves but his mask is tucked away in his pocket, leaving Sam's face exposed. He knows it's a risk, knows that the Fed is crawling with security guards and covered in cameras, but Sam can't draw any attention to himself until he knows that the robbery is taking place—so until shit hits the fan, Darkside can't make an appearance.
Sam spends hours watching hundreds of people enter and exit the building, looking for anyone remotely suspicious or even anyone who could become the innocent hostage. After a while, he begins to worry. Sam doesn't know when the attack will happen, after all, doesn't know if it will be today. The timeline fits, but the Demon isn't exactly the type to stay on a schedule. Sam can't spend the next week sitting in the Fed's lobby—he's sure to draw unwanted attention from the security guards at that point—so what will he do if an attack doesn't happen?

And there's also the fact that he could have gotten the location wrong. The Demon has attacked five traditional banks so far, and the Federal Reserve isn't exactly a normal bank. However, Sam is pretty confident in his choice. Whether he's after money or publicity, robbing the Fed would get the Demon exactly what he wants—this bank holds more money than any other single building in the entire world, and as far as Sam is aware, no one has ever physically broken into the Fed and gotten away with it.

Sam's overanalytical train of thought is abruptly broken when his phone starts to ring, and when he answers the call he's surprised to hear Karen Page on the other line.

"Sam?" She asks immediately and Sam frowns, wrinkling his forehead in confusion. He knows that the whole point of Karen giving him her number was so that she could update him on her search for the Demon's identity, but she already found it, already told him. And while their relationship has slowly developed from one of awkward alliance to one of uncomfortable friendship—two days after the fourth robbery, Karen actually invited Sam to her apartment for dinner—it hasn't progressed quite enough to warrant a social call.

"Miss Page," Sam says after a minute, glancing around the room. He wasn't able to find anything online that specified whether the Fed's security cameras recorded sound as well as video, so he'll have to play it safe and avoid saying anything incriminating. "How can I help you?"

"I just wanted to let you know that Daredevil woke up this morning," Karen says, and Sam's eyes widen.

"Really?" He asks, grinning. "That's great!"

"He's still very weak, and Claire says that it will take him at least two weeks to get back on his feet, maybe longer," Karen admits. "But he's conscious and he's talking, so Claire doesn't think there's going to be any permanent damage."

"That's really great, Karen," Sam says, choosing to temporarily abandon his surveillance in favor of the first piece of good news he's heard in days. "Have you gone to see him?"

"I actually just left the clinic," Karen explains. "I'm heading back to my apartment right now to get some work done. I just thought you'd want to know that Daredevil is going to be okay."

"Thank you for telling me, Karen, it means a lot," Sam says, a small smile forming on his face as he picks up his survey of the room. His eyes land on a pair of security guards and he frowns, focusing in on the concerned expressions on their faces. "I've got to go, Karen." Sam waits for the reporter's farewell before he hangs up, slipping his phone into his pocket and focusing his attention on the conversing guards. One of them, Sam knows, has been standing in that corner all morning, but the other Sam recalls being posted on the street outside. Sam also knows that the shift change isn't for another hour at least, so there's really no reason for the guard to be inside—unless, of course, something is wrong.

As Sam's anxiety intensifies, so do his senses, and he begins to pick up on other worrying signs. Sam starts to hear sirens outside, worryingly close—within a couple of blocks at least—but not
directly outside of the Fed. As Sam continues to watch the guards, he notes that the near-constant stream of people coming into the building has diminished significantly. The final sign—and the one that finally catches the attention of the rest of the civilians in the Fed's lobby—is a middle-aged woman who bursts through the doors at a full sprint, her eyes wide.

"They're robbing the bank!" She exclaims, and Sam's eyes widen as he turns away from the guards to scrutinize the woman more closely. She's wearing a pair of dress pants and a blouse, but they're out of place, moved by the wind from her desperate sprint. Sam wonders why she thought the Fed would be the best place to go. "The Chase bank across the street, they're robbing it! He's got a little girl!" That's all that needs to be said for Sam to push all other thoughts aside and get to work. He jumps to his feet and runs out the door alongside several other people, looking across the intersection to see that the small bank across the road is surrounded by cop cars. Sam was right about this attack being bigger than the rest—rather than just a robbery, this appears to be a hostage situation—but he was wrong about the location. It's his first mistake of the day.

Something tells Sam that he's far from making his last.

Sam ducks into an alley as he pulls up his mask, blinking and watching as the world turns yellow. Thankful that the Chase bank is one of the ones he visited after the fourth robbery, Sam teleports into the lobby, looking around and rapidly taking in the scene. The majority of the bank's occupants—including several unarmed security guards who were probably just for show—are frozen, staring at a man in a black jacket and a black mask who is holding a gun to the head of a little girl with black hair. Black hair that's tied back with a light pink ribbon that perfectly matches her dress.

And then, Sam understands.

This bank doesn't look exactly like the one in Sam's vision, but he isn't entirely surprised. The location was never what mattered, it was the people within. And Sam recognizes everyone in this room, from the terrified security guards to the bank tellers to the Asian man in a navy blue suit standing to Sam's left. The bank doesn't have to be the same because the people are. And the people are the reason Sam is here.

Even though he knows what's about to happen, even though he knows how this ends, Sam follows the script laid out for him in dreams and his nightmares and his visions.

It's his second mistake.

Sam takes a single step toward the masked man, clearing his throat loudly and letting his eyes flare. The man is so surprised to see Sam that he loosens his hold on the little girl, the smart little girl who immediately squirms free and starts running toward Sam, toward the man in a navy suit standing to his left. And just like in Sam's vision, the masked man shakes free of his confusion and raises his gun. And just like in Sam's vision, an explosion rocks the entire bank.

But unlike in his vision, Sam hears the gun go off, hears the gunpowder ignite and the whistle of the bullet as it sails through the air. Unlike in his vision, Sam sees the bullet, sees the silver streak flying toward the little girl's back. Unlike in his vision, Sam throws up his right hand and stops the bullet before it reaches its target.

The silver bullet hangs in mid-air and the little girl keeps running, and she doesn't stop running until she slams into her father's chest and he wraps his arms around her, hugging her tightly and swearing that he'll never let her go again. Sam smiles, letting the bullet fall to the floor as he glares at the masked man, at the gun in his hand.
Get out of here before I make you." Sam says, figuring that even though he doesn't know what happens from here, even though his vision never showed him this version of events, he'll be able to finish this relatively easily.

It's his third mistake.

It's funny how determined fate can be. You'd think that by now, Sam would have learned not to tempt it.

"Darkside. I was wondering when you would make an appearance." The masked man says, his eyes flashing black. For a moment Sam thinks that he's dreaming, thinks that this is another vision blended with a nightmare and that it's all happening inside his head—none of the previous robbers were demons, Sam was sure of that, and yet this one is. But the moment passes too soon and Sam watches hopelessly as the masked man fires once, twice, three times, sending one bullet at the little girl and her father, one bullet at a security guard to Sam's right, and one bullet directly at Sam. And Sam puts his hands up and stops two bullets but the third one keeps flying, and Sam learns the hard way that his teleportation isn't the only power he has that has limits.

Sam assumed that, like a demon, his telekinetic abilities stemmed from his mind, that his hands were only a way to focus them, like a scope or an instinct or even a dramatic flair. He realizes now that he should have tested himself further, should have tried to push his abilities to their limits, because maybe he would have known that he had limits. Maybe he would have known that his palms aren't an instinct or a scope but the source of his power. Maybe he wouldn't have gotten himself trapped in a room with three bullets and two hands. Sam can stop two bullets but he doesn't have enough hands, enough power to stop the third. He overestimated himself and his abilities.

It's his fourth and final mistake.

A sharp pain erupts in Sam's chest and two floating bullets fall to the ground, the sound of their impact drowned out by the sound of Sam's. The yellow in Sam's eyes flickers and dies as he gasps for breath, his throat void of air and slick with blood as he chokes on the bullet in his chest. And Sam's mind is foggy but he can still see the people starting to approach him and he can still remember what will happen if they try to help him—"Trust me, Alex, if I'm ever taken to a hospital, the cops will be waiting for me in the parking lot"—so he closes his eyes and pictures the only safe place he has left, hopes and prays that he has enough power to get himself there.

Sam pictures the small apartment that he's only seen once when he was invited by a reporter who wanted to be a friend. He's only been there once but he can see it, can see curtains and a couch and a kitchenette, but he ignores the room and focuses instead on blonde hair and blue eyes. Sam has only seen the apartment one time but he knows that he can get there, because it isn't the location that's important, it's the people.

And then Sam hears a surprised yelp and opens his eyes to see Karen Page standing over him—he should have gone to Claire because Claire is the only one that could save his life, but Sam can't picture her, can't get to her. He could have gone to Claire's apartment but Daredevil woke up this morning so she probably isn't there, and Sam has never seen the clinic. But he knew that Karen was home because Karen called him and told him so, and he knew Karen's home because she invited him there for dinner. And Sam just might live through the bullet in his chest because Karen has made an effort to be there for Sam ever since he first met her, back when he was just a man with a broken leg and a broken mind looking for directions to the warehouse district.

Karen Page is more of a hero than Sam will ever be. Sam hopes that he lives through this so that he can tell her so.
Sam shifts and it feels like knives are plunging through his soul, and the world spins as Sam gasps in pain and his mouth begins to fill with blood.

"Oh my god," Karen says, her voice tight and terrified as Sam bleeds out on her carpet. She pulls out her phone and Sam tries to stop her but when he tries to speak, he just gurgles blood and when he tries to reach out, his hand just falls onto his chest, driving another spike through his heart, his soul, his brain.

Relief fills Karen's tone as she listens to whoever is on the other line but it doesn't reach her face, and soon the black spots steadily filling Sam's vision obscure Karen from view and plunge Sam into darkness.

And the blood rushing to Sam's ears drowns out Karen's urgent pleas, and the sharp metallic smell of the blood fills his nose and his mouth, until all at once they're gone, the sounds and the smells and the tastes.

The last thing Sam is aware of is the pulsing pain in his chest before that, too, fades away and he's enveloped in the comforting arms of darkness.
Chapter 28

Sam is running.

He doesn't know where he's running to or what he's running from, but he's running anyway. He doesn't even know how he's running—the last thing he remembers is passing out in Karen's apartment—but here he is, suddenly, inexplicably running down the street.

After a minute Sam's head turns without his permission and he yells to some people on the sidewalk: "Run! Get out of here! Evacuate!" The words are coming from Sam's mouth but they aren't his—they come from his body, not his mind. It's familiar, too familiar, and Sam realizes that he isn't in control of his own body—which means that, chances are, this is another memory, another dream, another nightmare.

Sam continues to shout warnings to people who look as confused as he feels, never once slowing down, never once checking to see if anyone is following him. It isn't until he comes across a young girl sitting on the curb alone with an ice cream cone that he stops, crouching down beside her, his lips pulling up into a smile that he doesn't really feel.

"Hey, what's your name?" Sam asks the girl, who looks up curiously, pausing in the middle of a lick. She opens her mouth, forms a reply, but she never gets a chance to speak it, and Sam never gets the chance to hear it. A loud rumble is the only precursor to the massive crashing sound that drowns out every sound in the beginning, and the shockwave that accompanies it—which itself is accompanied by a wave of heat and a cloud of shrapnel—sends both Sam and the girl flying into the street. Sam's head slams into a telephone pole and his vision spins as he collapses to the ground. The pain in his head is drowned out by the pain in his right leg and black spots begin to crowd Sam's vision but he looks around wildly, just barely able to make out a small body splayed out on the roof of a car, half hidden by a broken windshield, before the darkness takes over and Sam loses his fight with unconsciousness.

Sam blinks and suddenly he's standing on an all-too-familiar road in an all-too-familiar town and Dean is standing before him, wearing a relieved smile that melts into terror in an instant. The sharp, debilitating stab in Sam's back is just as painful as it was the first time around, and as he collapses to his knees, Sam begins to understand what's going on. He's dreaming, trapped in unconsciousness or possibly even a coma, trapped in the memories of the past.

Sam has wondered ever since he learned the truth about Lebanon how Dean got out of the blast zone and he didn't. Now he knows. He stopped to warn people, stopped to try to save that little girl, and it cost him his chance at escape.

And he didn't even save her.

As Dean's body is torn to shreds, Sam closes his eyes, willing the scene to change. And it does. One after another, different images appear before Sam, moving pictures depicting the lowest points of his life that he can remember and several that he can't. Sam is trapped in a cycle of some of the worst moments of his past, intertwined with slivers of his present and—somehow—glimpses of his future. He doesn't know how he knows but he does, senses that some of the scenes he's being shown are of things that have yet to happen, things that—like the shooting at the bank—will happen, no matter how hard Sam tries to stop them. The problem is that, while Sam knows with some degree of certainty that some of the scenes are visions of the future, he doesn't know which ones.
Sam figures that his demon blood-induced abilities, combined with the gunshot wound and whatever medication Claire gave him—if he ever did get to the clinic—probably tore a hole in Sam's mind, and now the past and the present and the future are all converging and Sam can't tell what's what. He can't stop the endless cycle of ever-changing scenery, either, so he's forced to settle in for the ride as he falls from memory to memory and vision to vision and tries to figure out which is which.

For a while, Sam drifts from one scene to another, a spectator of his own life, closing his eyes in one world and opening them in another with no control over how or when it happens.

The scenes themselves devolve over time, reverting from the long, confusing movie scene of the Lebanon memory to short little flashes of familiar faces intertwined with strangers, disjointed and apparently unrelated to whatever precedes and follows them.

After Dean draws his final breath and the hellhounds disappear, Sam suddenly finds himself in a hospital watching Bobby's smile fall from his face for the last time. Moments later, Sam watches as a blond, blue-eyed man smiles reassuringly at him, apparently ignoring the red stain that is growing rapidly on his white shirt. A flash of silver draws Sam's eyes away from the man and he finds himself looking at Jack, who is glaring at Sam with venom in his glowing gold eyes. Then Jack steps to the side and Dean steps forward, and his eyes are glowing blue, and they both raise one hand and the light that shoots out blinds Sam for a moment, turns everything white. And Sam's vision clears and the white takes the shape of the hospital bed Sam is lying in, and Karen Page is sitting to his right while Claire Temple stands at the foot of the bed. They both look up at Sam but he's pulled away too soon, back into the world of dreams and memories.

The hospital room glows yellow and turns into a reflection in Asmodeus's eyes as he cackles, gesturing to a little girl in a pink dress standing to his right. The concrete wall behind them becomes a concrete room and Jody, Claire, and Alex huddle together in the middle, watching warily as Sam approaches them with his arms raised. The angry red marks on Jody's wrists grow until they're covering her arm and then it isn't her arm anymore but Daredevil's, and the raven-haired man Sam last saw lying unconscious on the floor of Claire's apartment is the one standing at the foot of Sam's bed, his eyes closed but his face pointed directly at Sam.

Sam tries to speak but a sharp pain in his chest travels down to his leg and when he looks down he finds himself lying on the street, surrounded by fire and debris. Sam tries to look at his leg but all he can see is torn flesh and shattered bone and the shredded remains of the right leg of a pair of blue jeans, and the world starts to spin as the nearest fire grows closer until it's right on top of him, right above him. And then Jess is in the fire, staring down at Sam, and then it's Azazel with a bullet in his forehead and a gun pointed at his head, and then it's Sam on the receiving end, falling backward with a chest full of shotgun pellets.

A brief glimpse of Heaven turns into the Cage turns into a golden crack in the wall of the universe, and then the trees become a photograph and Sam watches as Bobby steps into a small apartment that Sam has never seen before, starts to converse with a man Sam doesn't recognize. A comic book in the background draws Sam's eye and suddenly he sees a silver hammer on a glass table, a hammock made of spiders' webs, a glowing green gem, swirling yellow eyes.

And then the yellow eyes are Sam's own and he's watching a bullet fly into his chest, and the sharp pain that follows forces his eyes open, forces the onslaught of memories and visions of the past and the present and the future to grind to a halt.

It takes a moment for Sam's vision to clear, but when it does he finds himself back in the hospital room with Claire Temple standing at the foot of his bed.
"Sam, can you hear me?" She asks and Sam nods, blinking slowly and trying to sort through everything he just saw. Some of the scenes were clearly memories—the various deaths of various people, and the Cage—while others were most likely memories that he's just forgotten, like the crack in the universe and the memory of the little girl in Lebanon. But for the majority of the images, Sam has no idea what to think. Could he have forgotten more of his past than he thought, or was his mind so scattered that it showed him multiple events that will happen in his future?

"I'm awake," Sam says, pushing everything he saw to the back of his mind. For all he knows, everything he just saw was simply a nightmare.

It wouldn't be the first time that Sam was haunted by something created entirely by his own mind.

"Do you remember what happened?" Claire asks. Sam nods, looking down at his chest and swallowing hard. He's shirtless and his upper chest and right shoulder are wrapped in gauze.

"I got shot," Sam says, recalling the incident easily—after all, he just relived it a moment ago. "By one of the Demon's robbers." Claire nods, apparently satisfied with Sam's answer.

"The bullet entered your chest, ricocheted off of your collarbone, and exited the front of your chest again," Claire explains. "You've got two gunshot wounds about two inches apart roughly opposite your heart. Your collarbone was cracked, which is why your shoulder is stabilized as well, but it's minor and well on its way to healing." She hesitates, sending Sam a stern look. "You're extremely lucky. That bullet could have punctured your lung or shattered your collarbone. Or both." Sam doesn't feel very lucky—the longer his brain has to process, the more aware he becomes of the near-constant ache in his chest—but he nods anyway.

"How long was I out?" Sam asks. While the revolving door of memories and nightmares didn't seem to last much longer than half an hour, Sam doubts that he was only unconscious for that long. With the amount of blood that he probably lost through the two open wounds, Sam is surprised that he even lived.

"Five days," Claire says. "You've been drifting in and out of consciousness for a while now, but this is the first time you've stayed awake long enough to answer my question. It's April 15, about two in the afternoon. Almost exactly five days after you got yourself shot live on the internet." Sam's eyes widen at this and he starts trying to sit up, which earns him a blistering look from Claire. "Lie down. Don't use your arm, or you risk fully breaking your collarbone." Sam adjusts his head in the pillow but obeys Claire's order, craning his neck to watch as the nurse heads to the table in the corner of the room and picks up a TV remote. There's a flat screen mounted on the wall opposite Sam's bed—whoever funds this place must have a lot of money just lying around—and when Claire turns it on, the first thing that appears on the screen is a grainy image of Darkside that looks like it was screenshots from a cell phone video.

"...ays since the sixth attack in a string of robberies that have left the public on edge." An anchor says as the picture disappears, replaced by a news desk with two women seated behind it. "New York's newest vigilante, Darkside, is credited with ending the robberies as a result of this video, which was originally live-streamed to Instagram five days ago." The picture of Darkside appears again and, after a second, the video starts to play. Sam watches the incident at the bank through another pair of eyes, watches as he appears in the middle of the room and challenges the robber. The first bullet Sam stopped in the air is captured by the camera in a flash of silver, and the camera's view briefly shifts away from Darkside and the robber in order to capture the little girl's safe return to her father. When the robber addresses Darkside, the camera moves back to him. The robber fires three times and the camera shakes but remains in focus—and although the three bullets that were fired can't be seen on the footage, it's easy to identify the three intended targets.
A beat passes and two bullets fall to the ground harmlessly, and the person holding the phone—a teenage boy, Sam guesses based on his voice—breathes a sigh of relief, commenting "He did it, Darkside caught the bullets." A moment later the boy gasps as Darkside falls onto his side and then onto his back, one hand pressed against his chest—"Darkside was shot, oh my god!"—and the video abruptly goes black as the boy shoves his phone into his pocket. Although there's no visual, the audio continues, and a shudder rips through Sam at the sound of his own pained groan, which is followed by several cries for help and a chorus of surprised shouts—probably in the immediate aftermath of Sam's disappearing act. After a second, the visuals reappear, depicting a red puddle on the tile. "Darkside got shot in the chest but he's gone. He teleported away." The teen explains breathlessly to his viewers. "Oh god, I hope he's okay." The video pans over to a little girl in a pink dress who is still hugging her father tightly. "He saved that girl and her dad. They're okay." A police officer appears on one side of the screen and the video abruptly cuts off, frozen on the shot of the little girl and her father as the news anchors resume their commentary.

"Darkside has not been seen since he was apparently shot attempting to stop a robbery at the Chase bank." The second anchor says. "The robber in question, 31-year-old Parker West, was taken into police custody seconds after Darkside's disappearance."

"Due to his actions, Darkside is being hailed as a hero, with fans beginning to show their support on social media." The first anchor continues. "Many concerned citizens are calling for the Avengers and other local heroes to release Darkside's current status, but there has been no confirmation that the vigilante is even alive." Claire switches the TV off and turns to Sam, who raises an eyebrow.

"Tony Stark made an official announcement this morning on behalf of the Avengers," Claire says. "He explained that the Avengers don't currently know Darkside's identity and have yet to meet him, so they don't know his status. Stark also left the reporters at the press conference a number for Darkside to call if he did, in fact, survive the shooting. The Avengers apparently also want to know if you're okay." Sam nods, setting that particular piece of information aside to worry about—read: geek out about—later.

"That little girl, she's okay?" Sam asks and Claire nods, cracking a smile.

"Her name is Alison Park," Claire informs Sam, who returns the smile. "She turns five in less than a month and her father, the man who was with her at the bank, works at Rand Enterprises. Alison has been interviewed a few times over the past few days and she really wants Darkside to know that he's her new favorite superhero."

"I'm just glad I could save her," Sam says, frowning. "That robbery almost ended very differently." He doesn't plan on sharing the details of his vision with anyone, doesn't plan on anyone ever knowing that he's never been able to so much as predict the future. Sam's visions have always been somewhat pointless, often depicting acts of violence that will inevitably happen no matter what Sam does. The bank shooting is just another vision Sam failed to stop.

"It still could if you aren't careful," Claire warns, drawing Sam's attention back to the conversation. "Your collarbone is still healing, and moving your arm too much too fast could cause serious problems. You're going to have to stay put for at least a few days, maybe longer." Sam opens his mouth to protest but Claire shakes her head. "Sam, you've been living on the streets for over a month, and you're still recovering from months of torture and losing a limb. You can't just jump back into the fray and pretend that you're fine. I know that you're a fast healer, but you aren't invincible."

"Someone needs to be out there, helping people." Sam protests, gesturing to the door. "I assume
that Daredevil still isn't back on his feet, so if I'm stuck in here, too, there's no one out there."

"You and Daredevil aren't the only vigilantes in New York," Claire replies sternly. "Daredevil has several friends who can watch over Hell's Kitchen for him. If you're that worried about New York, I can ask them to run extra surveillance." Claire's tone suggests that she's done arguing so Sam bites his tongue, swallowing his retort. He can't risk explaining the true reasoning behind his worries—not the general level of violent crime in New York but the Demon.

With both Darkside and Daredevil indisposed, it's only a matter of time before the Demon puts his big plan into action. Whoever Daredevil's vigilante friends are, Sam doubts that they'll be able to take the Demon down unless Sam at least warns them about what he is and what he can do. But if these other vigilantes are anything like Daredevil—that is, entirely human—they probably wouldn't believe Sam anyway.

Sam can't let anyone else get hurt trying to fight the Demon. But he can't try to fight the Demon right now, either—trying to stop the Demon injured will just get Sam killed, and the Demon will be able to move forward with his endgame without anyone there to stop him.

Sam has always hated sitting still, has always hated waiting. But for now, he's going to have to settle for doing both.

And he's going to have to pray that the Demon does the same.
Chapter 29

Like far too many things in Sam's life, it all starts with a nightmare.

For nine days, Sam is trapped in the room at the clinic. He spends his waking hours alternating between pacing back and forth across the room and convincing Karen to help him with the work for his law class whenever she stops by—Sam is under strict orders from Claire not to use his right arm, which makes navigating his laptop annoyingly difficult. Claire and Karen are Sam's only company in his room, and he's not allowed to leave—Claire cites Foggy's near-constant presence in the clinic as the reason behind Sam's house arrest, but he isn't entirely sure he believes her—his door never opened unless one of the two women is passing through it. For nine days, Sam has nothing to do other than his homework, and his only contact with the outside world other than Claire and Karen's visits is a daily call from Jody, who insists on constant updates in Sam's condition. Sam is usually left alone in his room and—thanks to the side effects of the medication Claire has him on—he often finds himself drifting into a strange world halfway between sleep and unconsciousness.

It's while he's in that state that Sam begins to see her, the little African American girl with the ice cream cone from Lebanon. The single memory he has of her—of asking for her name—plays over and over in Sam's dreams, the image of her body sprawled across the roof of a car burned into his mind until he's seeing her broken body everywhere, her figure overlaid on the world regardless of whether Sam's eyes are opened or closed. For nine days, Sam suffers quietly through the nightmares, the memories, watching himself try to save her and watching himself fail.

He wants to find her, needs to find her, but he can't bring himself to ask Claire of Karen for help, can't find the strength within him to share the memories that haunt him day and night with anyone else. So Sam waits, ignores the image at the back of his mind until nine days have passed and Claire finally unwraps his shoulder and tells him he can use his arm—and therefore his laptop.

As soon as Claire leaves the room to go speak to Foggy and Karen—the duo are most likely in Daredevil's room, and while Karen splits her time between visiting the two injured vigilantes and her own apartment, Sam is pretty sure that Foggy almost never leaves—Sam opens his laptop and searches for news reports not about the bombing itself but about the aftermath, about the people who were found and the people who weren't. The article that draws his attention is a list of the victims, a Buzzfeed listicle with a morbid theme. Sam has seen articles of this kind before, after mass shootings and acts of terrorism, but he's never seen one that fills him with this much dread, this much guilt—he's never seen one that fills him with this much guilt, this much guilt, this much guilt—his own name in the title.

Jody and Claire and Karen have all been referring to the bombing as 'the Lebanon bombing', and Sam always assumed that that was the colloquial term for it. Now, though, he realizes that just isn't true. To the rest of the world, to everyone but Sam himself, the bombing is apparently called 'the Winchester bombing'.

The sharp pain that forces its way through Sam's chest in that moment has absolutely nothing to do with his gunshot wound.

Unable to tear himself away, Sam reads the entire article. He reads the names and the stories of each one of the 52 people who were killed in the attack—28 found dead at the scene and the rest lost in hospitals in the following months—and forces himself to look at the pictures that sit between the names and the personal statements, forces himself to look into the eyes of the 52 innocent victims of a bombing that no one could have predicted, that no one could have stopped.
No one but Sam.

The 52 names are listed chronologically by time of death, and Sam almost clicks away from the article before he realizes that at the bottom of the page, a 53rd name waits.

**Samuel Winchester**

A picture of a younger Sam stares out of the screen, a petulant frown permanently affixed on his face. He looks annoyed and just a little bit scared, and there's a distinct glimmer of hope in his eyes that makes him a stranger, makes him just foreign enough that Sam almost doesn't recognize him. It's a Sam from another time, a Sam from before fallen angels and Leviathan and yellow-eyed demons—a Sam from back when the scariest thing he could think of doing was purposely getting arrested to stop a ghost in a prison and the worst problems the Winchester brothers had to face could easily be solved if they just worked together. It's a Sam that died a long time ago, and so it's almost fitting to see that face staring out from a list of the dead.

It is, after all, a list of people that Sam couldn't save.

The blurb under Sam's mugshot—because that's all the picture is, a mugshot—details his criminal history, and the final line calls him an 'alleged co-conspirator' in the plot to bomb Lebanon, Kansas. There's no mention of his parents' deaths, of his time at Stanford, of anything that could dredge up even an ounce of sympathy for the dead young man. 52 family photos, 52 stories of nurses and high schoolers with big dreams, and at the end of it all a mugshot and a description of a monster.

Sam clicks away from the article with a heavy heart, wondering how long ago he truly lost his chance at a normal life. It was certainly long before October 5, 2018.

The only good thing that comes out of Sam's decision to read the article is that the little girl Sam saw in Lebanon wasn't on it. If the girl wasn't one of the 52 victims, it means that she lived. It means that she survived the blast.

There's a second possibility—that the little girl's fate aligned more closely with Sam's than with the 52 other victims—but Sam, desperate for some semblance of hope, refuses to acknowledge it.

Instead, he finds a few other articles that talk not about the dead but about the living. There were 52 people who died in the bombing, but there were 96 others who were injured and survived—some of whom barely pulled through. According to one article, at least 17 of the living victims suffered life-altering injuries—amputated limbs, brain damage, paralysis—and three people are still in comas, six months after the blast. One of those three is a four-year-old African American girl named Mikaela Parkson.

Sam takes one look at the picture on the article and slams the lid of his laptop down, covering his face with his hands. His eyes close but the picture doesn't disappear, and as it stares into his mind, taunting him, he finds himself inadvertently absorbing every detail, memorizing every feature.

A little girl, lying in a hospital bed with bandages covering most of her body and a breathing tube shoved down her throat. The caption of the picture said that the photograph was taken in February, on Mikaela's fourth birthday.

She looked pale, looked thin, looked different, but there's no doubt in Sam's mind that she was the little girl from Lebanon.

Sam risked everything to try and save one person that day. To try and save one little girl. And he failed.
And his failure cost them both everything.

Sam screams at the heavens until his voice goes hoarse, screams at Castiel and Hannah and every angel he knows the name of and all of the ones he doesn't. No one comes when he asks to be taken back to October, so he can set it all right. No one comes when he asks to be taken away from here, so at least he can't hurt anyone else. No one comes at all.

When Sam's voice is reduced to a whisper, when he's certain that no one in Heaven will ever come, he leans forward, digs the palms of his hands into his eyes, and cries.

When Claire comes into the room four hours later with Sam's dinner, Sam is sitting up in bed watching the news. His laptop is discarded on the table to his right, and other than a slight redness around his eyes, there's no indication that he had any sort of episode at all—which was his intention. Sam knows that Claire and probably everyone else in the clinic heard his pleas, but he also knows that he can't tell anyone about Mikaela, knows that it will bring up too many questions he won't—and can't—answer. So instead, he pretends that nothing happened at all and hopes that Claire decides to do the same.

If Claire sees the rawness of Sam's eyes, she doesn't comment. She just hands him a burger, glances at the TV, then leaves without a word, taking two more burgers with her to give to the occupants of the other room. Since as far as Sam is aware, Foggy has yet to actually leave the clinic, he assumes that Karen is the one who isn't waiting in the other room.

Sam unwraps his burger and takes a bite without really looking at it, turning his attention back to the news. The time, according to the digital clock in the corner of the screen, is 7 pm, and right on schedule, Sam's burner phone starts to ring.

"Hey, Sam, how're you feeling?" Jody asks when Sam picks up, skipping the formalities and getting straight to work.

"Been better," Sam admits. "Been worse, too. I earned the right to use my shoulder today." He doesn't mention what he did as soon as he received that freedom, doesn't mention Mikaela Parkson. Jody is the closest thing to family that Sam has right now, but there are just some things that he has to keep to himself.

"I'm glad," Jody says cheerfully. "Been up to anything recently?" The sheriff sounds nonchalant but Sam detects another layer in her tone, and he finds himself growing suspicious of her motives.

"I haven't left the clinic in two weeks, so no, not really. Why?" Sam asks cautiously. Jody isn't usually one to mince words—in fact, she historically does quite the opposite—so why is she taking her time with this topic?

A few hours ago, a friend of mine called, asked if we could meet up." Jody explains. "Wanted to meet somewhere private, which was odd, but I agreed. We met at a bar outside of Sioux Falls, where he told me that another hunter told him that Sam Winchester made an appearance at a hunters' dive in Madison, Connecticut." Sam relaxes at this, cracking a small smile. So that's what this is about. As Sam predicted, the hunters at the bar couldn't resist spreading the biggest piece of gossip they'd ever gotten their hands on.

"I walked into the dive on accident looking for a drink," Sam explains. "They recognized me, tried to corner me, and I may have given off the impression that I was a demon."

"Possessed by a demon or actually a demon?"
"Sam Winchester the demon, à la Dean with the Mark of Cain." Sam clarifies. "I needed to get someone to take care of the kitsune so I could get back to Manhattan and deal with the robberies, but I also needed to make sure that my current status of not being dead didn't make it to the media."

"Couldn't you have just pretended to be a ghost or something?" Jody asks half-jokingly.

"Tried that," Sam admits. "Almost got away with it, too, but someone grabbed my arm before I could get out." He hesitates, biting the inside of his cheek. "The demon thing is probably better in the long run, anyway. At least this way no one will try to break into FBI Headquarters to salt and burn my leg." Jody actually laughs at Sam's poor attempt at a joke, and Sam smiles halfheartedly.

"Well, if you wanted to keep your reputation intact, you were definitely successful." Jody comments. "The hunter I met up with, George Mason, took fifteen minutes to work up the courage to even say your name. The poor guy seemed to think that you would pop up out of nowhere and snap his neck."

"He got me confused with Voldemort," Sam says, the smile on his face dropping slightly as he briefly considers the parallels. "I didn't set out to inspire fear in the hearts of hunters everywhere, but I guess I'll take it."

"Just watch out for the hunters who don't take kindly to monsters of any kind," Jody warns. "Mason said the contact of his who was actually at the bar wanted to form a group for some kind of witch hunt."

"Was this friend named Bruce Marshall, by chance?" Sam asks.

"You know him?" Jody replies curiously.

"He was definitely at the bar. Put a gun to my head the second I walked in." Sam explains. It's a slight exaggeration, but the general idea of what happened is still there. "He also dropped his gun the second I flashed my yellow eyes. He's an old friend of Bobby's, I know that much, and unless he's willing to risk pissing off Bobby Singer, he's probably harmless. I don't think he'll actually work up the courage to try anything, and if he does, well, I'm pretty sure that an exorcism won't work on me."

"Yeah, but a gun or an angel blade will." Jody points out. "Just be careful, okay?"

"Unlike Dean and I, most hunters don't tend to encounter and kill angels in large numbers," Sam says. "I doubt Bruce Marshall has access to any angel blades." He pauses, briefly considering asking Jody to deliver Sam some weapons—unwilling to risk a weapon-filled duffel bag being found in a back alley by the police, Sam long ago abandoned the weapons Claire Novak gave him in Queens—but decides against it. Sam is trying to leave his old life behind, trying to leave hunting behind. Staying away from the guns and knives that will forever be tied to the creatures Sam killed with them is the first step.

Sam hears a whisper of familiarity and glances at the TV to find his own face staring back at him—sort of. It's definitely Sam, just the Sam who has yellow eyes and a black mask.

"Two weeks have passed since the robbery at the Chase bank that left local vigilante Darkside injured." The anchor is narrating over the picture.

"Jody, I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?" Sam says. Jody replies with a quick confirmation and Sam hangs up, dropping his phone into his lap as he watches the news report.

"With no sightings of the hero in the days since the robbery, New York residents are beginning to
speculate that Darkside did not survive the shooting." The other anchor continues. "With Darkside MIA for two weeks, attention is now being drawn to Daredevil, a known ally of the new vigilante who has reportedly been missing for almost a month. Fearing the worst, the residents of Hell’s Kitchen are beginning to wonder if the latest kingpin of crime in New York City, known only as the Demon, may have had something to do with Daredevil's disappearance."

"The Demon's involvement in the string of robberies that Darkside put an end to is already well-known, and many locals have started to theorize that Darkside and Daredevil were working together to put an end to the Demon's plans." Sam frowns at this, recalling that he still doesn't know what those plans are. "Regardless of the Demon's involvement, it's clear that Darkside and Daredevil's absences have been noticed by the criminals of New York. There has been an increase in violent crime in Manhattan over the last three weeks and a sharp increase over the last five days, with four major public shootings reported in the past 48 hours alone. Without the presence of New York’s most feared vigilantes, it appears that criminals are choosing now to strike." An image of a soccer ball appears on the screen and Sam grabs the remote, switching off the TV.

He knew, of course, that the public would eventually notice that Darkside and Daredevil were both MIA. He also knew that the Demon would most likely use that time to move forward with his plans. But what Sam didn't count on was lower level criminals taking advantage of the lack of vigilantes on the streets. Four shootings in two days are just worrying enough to terrify a city, just rare enough to be a serious issue. And as time goes by and thieves and drug dealers continue to commit crimes without any interference from the vigilantes of New York, people will start getting braver. The level of crime will only escalate from here.

Unless Sam does something about it.

Sam isn't fully healed yet. He just got the bandages off of his shoulder today and he's still taking pretty strong pain medication for the gunshot wound in his chest. He can't get into any big fights right now and expect to win. But he can prove to New York—to the world—that Darkside and Daredevil are still watching, that they aren't going anywhere. Sam grabs his phone, dialing a number he memorized months ago and taking a deep breath to steady his voice.

"Sam?" A light voice asks, and Sam smiles weakly when he shifts slightly and the stitches in his chest pull. He can do this. He has to do this.

"Karen, I need a favor."
Chapter 30

Josie's Bar doesn't look like much from the outside—or the inside, for that matter—but as soon as he walks through the door, Sam feels right at home.

He isn't entirely sure why Karen picked this place for them to meet—a seedy bar doesn't really seem her style—but he isn't necessarily complaining, either. Josie's is just seedy enough, just sketchy enough to put Sam right back into the shoes of the young hunter who spent his nights in dives just like this one, hustling pool and watching his brother flirt with college girls on a night out.

It's been years since the last time Sam watched Dean chat up a pretty twenty-something, but he can still picture the playful smirk on his brother always wore with ease.

Annoyingly aware of the fact that he's on at least two different prescription-grade medications—the slight tilt of the room with every shift of his head tells him that much—Sam refrains from ordering a beer, asking the woman behind the bar for a glass of water instead. She raises an eyebrow but doesn't comment, and about a minute later Sam is sipping from a glass of tap water with a few ice cubes and a lemon slice dropped in, watching the door and waiting for Karen's arrival.

It's been half an hour since he called and asked her to meet him somewhere outside of the clinic, twenty minutes since he walked into the bar right smack in the middle of Hell's Kitchen. Karen said to give her fifteen minutes so when twenty pass Sam starts to get worried, starts to wonder if the blonde changed her mind about helping him—or worse, encountered a problem on the way over. Sam is fully aware of the dangers lurking in every dark corner of Hell's Kitchen, fully aware that it's more dangerous than ever right now thanks to Daredevil and Darkside's absences.

It's the reason he teleported out of the clinic to meet Karen Page at a shady bar. It's the reason he called her in the first place.

No one should have to be afraid of the streets they live and work on. If Sam can stop one drug dealer or one mugger tonight, he'll call it a success. He only needs to stop one to get the message across to the rest, to tell them that Darkside is back and he isn't going anywhere.

Another ten minutes pass and Sam finds himself swirling the ice cubes around in his empty glass as his stomach ties itself in knots. He knows, logically, that the chances of something happening to Karen on the walk to the bar are slim to none, but he also saved her from falling off of a roof less than a month ago, so the usual statistics may not apply to the blonde. Sam also knows that Karen has a close relationship with more than one of the local vigilantes—including himself and Daredevil, he thinks there's at least one or two more she associates with on at least a regular basis—and that makes her a target for any enemies of theirs who know about that relationship. And, considering the long history of New York vigilantes' identities being known by their rivals—Sam certainly is no exception—Karen probably has more than one large target on her back at any given time.

Sam wonders, not for the first time, how she became such close friends with Daredevil in the first place. Given the unique lives lead by both of them—and by Foggy—he doubts the story is boring.

Before Sam can delve deeper into his thoughts, the bar's door swings open and Karen walks in, a messenger bag slung over one shoulder and her purse on the other. The blonde heads for a table in the corner and Sam takes a sip of slightly-melted ice as he stands, following her away from the bar.
"Are you sure you want to do this, Sam?" Karen asks when Sam slides into the booth across from her. As she speaks, she drops the messenger bag on the table between them, and Sam sets his water down beside it.

"I have to." He says, reaching for the bag and pulling it closer to him. "People are starting to notice my absence, and so are criminals."

"You're still hurt." Karen protests, nodding to the barely-visible lines beneath Sam's shirt where the bandages are still wrapped around his chest. His collarbone may be healed—mostly—but the gunshot wounds aren't, and Sam is reminded of that fact every time he moves his right arm the stitches on his chest pull.

"I've lived through worse," Sam replies. "Hell, I've fought through worse." He unzips the bag as he speaks, examining the contents. The bag contains a pair of dark blue jeans, a black t-shirt, the gloves Sam bought at the gas station in Maplewood, and the black jacket and accompanying mask that Melvin Potter made him a little over a month ago now.

Sam was wearing his Darkside costume when he was shot at the bank, but the jacket, mask, and gloves weren't in his room at the clinic when he woke up. He asked about it a few times in the first week before Claire finally admitted that she gave the clothes to Karen to put somewhere Sam wouldn't have easy access to. It was another way for Claire to try to keep Sam at the clinic, to keep him off of the streets while his shoulder healed. It almost worked, too.

As it turns out, Karen isn't quite as willing to cooperate with Claire as the nurse thought.

The public wants a Darkside sighting, but they need more than just eyewitness testimony. They need proof. Which is why Karen is here. She's going to help Sam show the world that New York's favorite vigilantes are far from dead.

Thankful that he's already wearing jeans and a t-shirt—Claire tried to convince Sam to wear scrubs or at least sweatpants, but he was desperate for some semblance of normalcy during his weeks at the clinic—Sam ignores the extras that Karen brought and grabs the jacket, shrugging it on. He slips on the gloves and shoves the mask into his pocket, smiling at Karen.

Step one: Meet Karen and get his costume back. Check. Step two: Find a crime to stop. Preferably one that won't result in Sam getting shot again.

Turning his senses outward, Sam listens for disturbances—shouting, gunshots, breaking glass—and waits. In a city the size of New York, crime is never far, especially now that the criminal underworld thinks Manhattan's vigilantes have taken the day off. It only takes a minute of listening for Sam to pick up on a faint shout and the sound of shattering glass, and he stands and heads for the door with a short nod to Karen. Karen slings the messenger bag over her shoulder and follows him out, and when the woman behind the bar hollers after Sam—he kind of forgot to pay for his water—Karen is quick to shout back a reply.

"Josie, he's with me! Put it on Foggy's tab!" Sam smiles as he exits, nodding to himself. Suddenly Karen's request to meet at this particular bar makes more sense. While Karen doesn't look much like the type to frequent a bar like Josie's, Franklin Nelson definitely does. And if Foggy is a regular, Josie probably would be more likely to look the other way should she have recognized Sam as, well, Sam.

Sam ducks into an alley and pulls on his mask, grabbing Karen's arm as she walks past and pulling her into the shadows. Tilting his head to one side, Sam hears another shout coming from the same direction as earlier and teleports himself and Karen toward it, his eyes flashing yellow.
They appear outside of a convenience store, and when Sam looks through the window he spots a kid in a ski mask pointing a handgun at the cashier. After taking a moment to zip up his jacket—Sam still isn't sure if the jacket is bulletproof like Melvin claimed, but his jacket was unzipped when he was shot in the bank and he'd at least like an extra layer before his skin the next time around—Sam strides through the door. The kid and the cashier both turn, watching in disbelief as Sam approaches. It isn't difficult for Sam to disarm the lone robber but he takes his time, making sure that Karen can snap a few photos on her cellphone before he calls the police and teleports to the roof of Karen's apartment building.

Settling down to wait—the robbery was on the other side of the island, so it will take a while for Karen to get home—Sam wonders how exactly he's going to repay the blonde. She didn't have to agree to help him, but he's extremely thankful that she did. Sam needed Karen's help to get his Darkside costume, but he needs her for much more than that. The public needs proof that Darkside is back, and Karen Page, a respected reporter for the New York Bulletin, is exactly the person who should be offering it.

Sam pulls his burner phone out of his pocket and glances at the time, frowning. If he went back to the clinic right now, Claire would never even know he was gone. She visits his room every night sometime after ten—it's currently 10:05—to give Sam another set of pills. From here on out, every minute Sam spends in the city is added risk that Claire finds out he left, added incentive for her to drug him until he's actually healed enough to fight bad guys in the streets. He could leave now. Technically, his job is done. Darkside has been spotted in Manhattan, alive and well and stopping crime.

But Darkside isn't the only vigilante in New York whose absence has been noticed.

When Karen arrives on the roof half an hour later, Sam is still standing there. He straightens as the blonde drops a dark green duffel bag at his feet, frowning.

"Are you absolutely sure about this?" Karen asks as Sam leans forward and picks up the bag.

"I don't need a close-up," Sam says, injecting false confidence into his tone. He honestly isn't sure about this. "He doesn't get many of those anyway. The usual blurry shot of a red figure in an alleyway will probably do the trick." Karen nods hesitantly, obviously not entirely comfortable with the second phase of Sam's plan. Sam understands her doubt. Going out into the city as Darkside is one thing, but going out as Daredevil is an entirely new level of risk. Sam didn't exactly ask the benched vigilante for his permission to don his suit and make an appearance in Hell's Kitchen, but that wasn't Sam's choice. If Claire wasn't so insistent that the two injured heroes never cross paths at the clinic, Sam would have asked Daredevil if this was alright with him before he left. Unfortunately, he's just going to have to hope that the raven-haired man's answer would have been yes.

"Meet me in my apartment when you're done," Karen says, nodding again and disappearing back into the building. Sam ducks behind a wall and quickly changes into the Daredevil suit—or at least, as much of it as he can. While Daredevil is by no means small, Sam has a few inches—and a few pounds—on him. The suit is uncomfortably tight in more than one place and Daredevil's signature cowl barely fits over Sam's head—the eye sockets certainly aren't in the right place because Sam quickly discovers that he's staring directly through a layer of red plastic—but everything still functions, and that's really all that Sam needs.

He's not planning on engaging in hand-to-hand combat with a troupe of ninjas or performing any Olympic-level acrobatics, after all. He just needs to make sure that Daredevil is seen in Hell's Kitchen tonight.
When Sam teleports into Karen's living room, she's already waiting by the door. When Karen sees Sam, she shoves her phone into her purse and hands Sam a billy club, which he spins experimentally a few times before nodding.

"Where to?" He asks. While Darkside tends to find himself stopping spontaneous crimes, Daredevil has always leaned more toward those of the premeditated nature, so Sam had Karen look for an arms deal or some other planned attack. Not entirely sure if the blonde would be able to find anything on such short notice, Sam is surprised when Karen nods, angling her head toward the window.

"There's a drug trade going down in an alley about a block in that direction." She explains. "Ecstasy, I believe." Sam nods, holding out one gloved hand—there was no way Sam could fit his hands into Daredevil's gloves, so he's still wearing his own—and smiling. Karen takes Sam's hand and he teleports them both one block in the direction Karen pointed out—not into the alley itself but onto the street just outside of it. Sam releases Karen's hand and teleports up to the roof, looking down into the alley and frowning.

From up here, he can't make out the alley through the red plastic of Daredevil's cowl. Sam blinks, turning the world a bright shade of orange and illuminating six figures in the alley below. As far as Sam can tell, two of the figures are holding guns. The rest appear to be in the middle of a discussion or maybe an argument—Sam's enhanced hearing can't pick up the hushed voices from this height. The six figures are split into two distinct groups, one—the one that includes the armed men—with four members, the other with two. Sam is pretty sure that there's a crate behind the larger group, most likely filled with drugs.

One of the men from the larger group holds something out to the buyers, and Sam takes that as his cue. He jumps from the roof and lands in a crouch on the fire escape about twenty feet from the ground. The loud metallic sound that bounces back and forth on the alley walls draws every pair of eyes right up to Sam.

"Shit, man, is that Daredevil?!" One of the buyers asks, taking a step back and raising his hands in surrender. One of the sellers nods to the two armed men—now that he's closer, Sam can say with confidence that they're armed—and they both raise their guns, pointing them at Sam. Before anyone has time to pull a trigger, Sam drops down into the alley and knocks the guns out of reach with the billy club, drawing on the two small fighting lessons he received from Daredevil back when the horned vigilante was training him.

Sam has never been a huge fan of hand-to-hand combat, but he has to admit that Daredevil's billy club is a pretty fun weapon to use.

The sound of approaching sirens reverberate through the alley and Sam curses internally, trying to decide what he should do. He could escape Daredevil-style—that is, back up the fire escape—and leave the drug traders for the police to find, but there's the risk that they would try to run and, on their way out of the alley, see Karen filming them. Or he could stay and finish the job, but risk the cops spotting him—and possibly realizing that the man in Daredevil's suit isn't actually Daredevil himself.

A stray thought crosses Sam's mind and he smirks, shaking his head. What would Daredevil do?

Sam spins around and strikes out, knocking one of the buyers out cold with one end of the billy club before swinging it around to trip up the two sellers. Luckily none of the present criminals have ninja-level fighting skills, so within about thirty seconds, all six men are lying on the ground in varying degrees of unconsciousness. Sam heads for the fire escape but before he can disappear back up to the roof, a police cruiser pulls up to the alley entrance. Sam blinks and the world turns
from orange to red—but now, at least, Sam can somewhat make out the facial features of his unexpected guests.

"Daredevil. Nice to see you back on the streets." A familiar voice says, and Sam watches as Detective Mahoney climbs out of the car and walks into the alley. His partner, Sam notices, also leaves the car but doesn't approach Sam, hanging back almost cautiously. Sam inclines his head, unwilling to risk imitating Daredevil's gruff voice in conversation with a cop who—if Sam's first encounter with him was any indication—knows the horned vigilante pretty well. Before the detective can say another word, Karen rounds the corner and walks right up to him with a grin on her face.

"Detective Mahoney, how are you?" Karen asks, nodding to Sam. "Daredevil?" Sam returns the nod before crossing his arms and leaning against the fire escape. Something tells him that leaving now would cast more suspicion than staying.

"Karen Page," Mahoney replies, shaking his head. "You never seem to be far behind our friend here." Mahoney inclines his head in Sam's direction.

"I've been looking for him for the past month," Karen says, "so you bet I'll be on the scene as soon as he makes an appearance." She hesitates, frowning. "Although I actually almost missed him this time around, thanks to his friend. Darkside stopped a robbery at a convenience store across town about forty-five minutes ago."

"You're telling me both of New York's missing vigilantes reappeared on the same night?" Mahoney asks skeptically, and Karen nods, smiling.

"I've got proof." She says. "Got pictures of both their takedowns. I'm going to put them on the Bulletin's website tomorrow morning."

"Good," Mahoney says to Sam's surprise, turning to him and nodding. "As much as you vigilantes irritate me, with the way crime in this city has been escalating, we could use the extra sets of hands." Sam returns the nod, shoving the billy club into its holster and scaling the fire escape as acrobatically as he can manage. Detective Mahoney, his partner, and Karen all watch as Sam disappears over the edge of the roof. After a minute, he glances back down and then, confident that Karen has the situation handled—and that Mahoney has the drug dealers handled—Sam teleports to Karen's roof, pulling off Daredevil's cowl and changing back into the clothes he left the clinic in. Sam folds Daredevil's suit and places it carefully in the duffel bag, then teleports into Karen's apartment, leaving the bag on her couch.

The mission was a success. Both Darkside and Daredevil were witnessed fighting crime in New York City, and tomorrow morning pictures of their fights will be on the homepage of the Bulletin's website for all of Manhattan—and the world—to see. Hopefully, the overeager criminals will see the warning for what it is and refrain from robbing convenience stores and arranging drug deals in back alleys.

With a small smile, Sam teleports back into his room at the clinic. The hairs on the back of his neck rise and he spins around, stiffening when he finds Claire Temple standing next to the door, her arms crossed and a scathingly disappointed look on her face. Sam winces, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly and pausing when he realizes that he's still wearing his gloves.

Well, shit.
Chapter 31

Sam can say with confidence that the last thing he expects Claire to do when he finds her waiting in his room at the clinic is actually let him continue going out. He pretty much ignored her direct orders, engaged in hand-to-hand combat with six people simultaneously with an injured shoulder, and did it all while drugged at least a little bit more than what could be considered safe for engaging in that type of activity—or any activity at all. Sam kind of figured that at worst, Claire would tie him to his bed, and at best she'd install a camera in his room.

Needless to say, he's shocked when she just gives him a quick lecture on disobeying orders from a medical professional and tells him to at least tell her where he's going the next time.

For the following four days, Sam goes out every night with Claire's begrudging blessing, stopping a few crimes as Darkside then swapping suits and exploring the city as Daredevil—uncomfortably aware of the limitations of his abilities, Sam has taken it upon himself to scuff his feet on every floor on the island of Manhattan, hoping to avoid a replay of what happened on Karen's rooftop; the image of the blonde reporter falling over the edge as Sam tried to teleport to her and landed five feet short has yet to leave Sam's mind, or his nightmares. Sam doesn't risk confronting the Demon—who hasn't been heard from since the last bank robbery, a fact that doesn't help the constant unease building in Sam's stomach—or attempting to mess with anyone who stands high on Daredevil's list of enemies, choosing to play it safe and stick to the low-level criminals who didn't quite get the message on Sam's first night back.

And despite the disappointed looks Sam earns every time he returns to the clinic with a new set of bruises, he's confident that he's doing the right thing. After four days, the crime rate has dropped back to where it was before Daredevil and Darkside disappeared, and the people of New York are getting more comfortable on their streets every day. With Darkside and Daredevil both apparently back on their feet, the city is back to normal—or at least, as normal as a city full of superheroes and vigilantes can get.

One thing Sam notices during those four days is that while the Demon himself has yet to show his face in New York, his henchmen do begin to reappear, committing petty crimes that serve only to draw Sam's attention to them rather than to do any real damage. On more than one occasion, Sam catches himself wondering if the Demon wasn't waiting for Darkside and Daredevil's disappearances but rather for their returns.

On the fourth day after Sam's first outing, Claire walks into Sam's room at about six in the afternoon wearing an expression that Sam can only describe as self-conscious. She's wringing her hands and avoiding Sam's eyes, and for a split second, Sam thinks that he's being ousted from the clinic.

The idea shouldn't affect him the way that it does, but Sam has found himself growing surprisingly comfortable with the white walls of his room. While he first regarded the room and its decor as equivalent a particularly dressy prison cell, the past few days of periodic freedom have allowed Sam to see the positives of his current situation. He has a roof over his head, a real bed for the first time in months, two or three meals every day—something that Sam probably shouldn't have let become out of the norm in the first place—and an easily-accessible shower. His clothes are washed, his injuries are cleaned, and he actually has consistent contact with people who ask him about his day and how he's doing. It's like home, in more ways than one, and Sam can't bear to lose another home.

But at the same time, he can't bear to take any more of Claire's hospitality. The nurse has done so
much for him already, has spent countless hours and probably dollars on him in the two and a half weeks he's been at the clinic.

Sam knows he has to go, knows he can't stay here forever. But that doesn't mean that he has to want to leave.

As it turns out, Sam's conflicted fears are unfounded—Claire doesn't so much as mention his stay at the clinic. What she says instead is, however, a much more worrisome problem.

"Sam, Foggy wants to know who you are," Claire says, and all thoughts of leaving the clinic are erased from Sam's mind in an instant as his heart skips a beat and his chest tightens.

"What?" He asks, somewhat surprised by the extent of his own worry at the prospect. Claire and Karen have both been tight-lipped about Sam's identity, so it stands to reason that Foggy would be the same. But Sam can't see himself trusting the lawyer—and despite the fact that they've only met one time, it's obvious to Sam that the man is a lawyer—especially given the caveats of Sam's identity. Karen Page is a reporter and Claire Temple is a nurse. They've both dedicated their lives to helping people and informing them. But Franklin Nelson is a lawyer. It's his job to either defend the innocent or prosecute the guilty—Sam doesn't know exactly what kind of lawyer is—and in the public's eye Sam Winchester is a far cry from innocent, undoubtedly guilty. Claire and Karen kept Sam's secret. So did Daredevil. But can Sam trust Foggy Nelson to do the same?

"It's been a month since you saved Daredevil's life, a month since you saved Karen's." Claire points out, and after some quick mental math, Sam is forced to admit that she's correct—down to the day. "Foggy just wants to meet the person who saved both of his best friends' lives in a single night."

"I don't know if I can do that," Sam says hesitantly, biting the inside of his cheek. "I've only met the guy once as Darkside, and that was when he was wanted by the police for killing two people. How do I know Nelson won't just go straight to the police and turn me in?"

"He won't," Claire says, her confident tone undermined by the hint of worry in her eyes. "Foggy is a lawyer. He defends the innocent. As soon as we explain to him that you aren't responsible for the Lebanon bombing, he'll be on your side."

"But we don't know that I'm not responsible." Sam points out, shaking his head. "I don't remember the bombing, not all of it. I don't know who planted the bomb, who triggered it, who orchestrated the whole thing. I spent four years at Stanford studying pre-law, almost became a lawyer myself. I know how a lawyer's brain works, how they judge people. Nelson won't see my amnesia as a sign of my innocence. He'll just see it as a sign that I might be guilty."

"That's not the kind of person Foggy is," Claire replies, frowning. "If you want, Karen and I can talk to him first, explain the situation before he ever sees your face."

"Is Karen on board with this?" Sam asks after a minute, and Claire nods, crossing her arms.

"You told her who you were after you saved her life." She reminds Sam, who nods hesitantly. "You thought that she deserved to know the truth, right? Well, Foggy almost lost two friends that night. He just wants to see the face of the man who stopped that from happening." The claim is strikingly familiar to Sam, and he can't stop himself from offering a retort.

"Daredevil has saved my life at least twice in the past two months, Claire," Sam says, frowning. "And I don't even know his name." Seeing the comment for what it is, Claire's expression tightens.
"The decision to tell Foggy is yours, Sam." She eventually says. "Daredevil is healing, but he isn't healed. You're capable of making that decision right now. He isn't. I don't want him to regret telling you the truth once he clears his head."

"It's been almost three weeks since he woke up, and he still isn't clear-headed?" Sam asks. He meant the question to sound flippant but when it comes out he can hear the concern in his own voice. Claire must hear it too because her expression softens and she relaxes her stance slightly.

"He suffered a serious concussion and minor brain damage," Claire says in a much more forgiving tone. "He's almost there, Sam, but in the absence of extenuating circumstances, I can't let him make any major decisions yet."

"Okay," Sam says, shaking his head and biting his cheek. He isn't entirely sure what makes him change his mind—although he has a feeling it's the fact that Daredevil is apparently still injured—but he finds himself nodding, feeling a bit like a bobblehead as he looks up at Claire. "I'll tell Nelson the truth." The nurse smiles, leaving the room. The door has barely closed before Sam is on his feet, pacing back and forth across the room as he thinks—and ignoring the strange sensation of cool tile under only one bare foot.

The first time Sam met Franklin Nelson, every cop in the city wanted Darkside in handcuffs. The yellow-eyed vigilante wasn't a hero, he was a killer. And yet when Foggy stepped into that alley and saw Darkside and Daredevil standing there, he took their side. He told Detective Mahoney that they were his friends. And sure, Daredevil really was his friend, but Darkside wasn't. Sam wasn't. Foggy could have said that Daredevil was with him but that he didn't know Darkside, and Mahoney could have dragged Sam out of that alley in handcuffs. But Foggy saw Darkside and Daredevil standing side by side and decided that he would help both of them, protect both of them.

Protect Sam.

Sam knows, logically, that what Foggy did that day wasn't because he cared at all about Darkside, wasn't because he agreed with anything New York's newest vigilante said or did. Foggy didn't trust Sam. He didn't know Sam. But he knew Daredevil, and he trusted his friend's judgment.

Hopefully, Foggy will trust that same judgment today.

When the door to Sam's room opens again, Karen and Claire are the first to walk through. The blonde offers Sam a shy smile and he nods, sitting down on his bed and resting his right foot on top of his left. It's a very uncomfortable position—the metal leg isn't exactly light—but some defensive part of Sam hopes that if Foggy sees that Sam is injured, he might be more inclined to believe him. Claire claims her usual position at the foot of Sam's bed and Karen turns back to the doorway, nodding to someone standing just out of sight.

And then Franklin Nelson walks into the room, a nervous smile on his face that drops right off the second he sees the face of the man waiting for him.

"Um, hi," Sam says awkwardly, face flushing as he waves to the stunned man standing frozen in the doorway. Karen elbows her friend in the side and Foggy lifts a hand in greeting, forcing a smile but never quite losing that expression of pure disbelief. The lawyer doesn't appear to be scared so much as surprised, which Sam takes as a good sign.

"You're Sam Winchester," Foggy says, and Sam nods. "And you're also Darkside." Sam nods again. "And you're also supposed to be dead." A third nod—Sam is really starting to feel like a bobblehead—and Sam smiles weakly as Foggy stares at him, wearing an expression that gives Sam the impression of a rebooting computer. "How?" The lawyer asks after a minute.
"Sam, this is Franklin Nelson," Karen says, shooting her friend a scathing glare.

"Foggy." Foggy corrects almost automatically, and Sam finds a small grin forming on his face. He definitely relates to that.

"Nice to meet you," Sam says.

"But... your leg was..." Foggy trails off when his eyes land on the metal foot that protrudes from the end of Sam's jeans.

"In Lebanon." Sam finishes Foggy's thought, nodding. "I was in Lebanon when the bomb went off, and it literally tore my leg from my body. When the FBI found it and then found that it belonged to me, they decided to declare me dead. Obviously, I'm not dead."

"No, you're not." Foggy agrees, still trying to process everything he's just learned. "So, if Daredevil, Karen, and Claire haven't dropped you off at the precinct wrapped in duct tape yet, I'm going to assume that the bombing wasn't actually your fault."

"Not as far as I'm aware," Sam replies. Foggy raises an eyebrow at this but after another not-so-subtle nudge from Karen, he apparently decides that questioning Sam's words isn't worth the effort.

"And the next five months?" Foggy asks instead. "The bombing was in October, but Darkside didn't show up in Manhattan until March. Have you been here the whole time?"

"Not exactly," Sam says, biting his cheek again. "I was actually kidnapped in the aftermath of the bombing." Foggy's eyes widen at this admission and Sam smiles weakly. "I broke out in mid-February and discovered that I was in Hell's Kitchen. I may have been held in the city the entire time, but I honestly have no idea." Sam recalls the night he first encountered Daredevil and shudders, fighting back images of his escape that begin to infiltrate his mind. "During the months I was being held, I received the abilities that Darkside uses." Sam blinks and his eyes turn yellow, and Foggy flinches back, obviously surprised. "Daredevil found me in an alley the night I escaped and offered me help in the form of Claire's phone number, which I didn't use because I didn't have a phone. After I got stabbed by a drunk guy in that same alley while trying to stop him from assaulting a girl, Daredevil took me to Claire's apartment. He started training me, helped me get a costume, and a few weeks later I stopped the robbery at the convention center." Foggy nods, and Sam tenses as he waits for the lawyer's reaction.

"Man, that's badass," Foggy finally says, breaking out into a grin. "I had my doubts about Darkside when we first met in that alley, but I decided to trust Matt's judgment. Looks like he was right."

"I had my doubts about Darkside when we first met in that alley, but I decided to trust Matt's judgment. Looks like he was right."

Sam disregards the reference to Daredevil's real name—the vigilante has been referred to as 'Matt' several times now by Claire, Karen, and Foggy, but there are probably a thousand Matts and Matthews in New York so there's no point in Sam trying to find the right one—and returns Foggy's smile.

"I'm glad you think so," Sam says, surprised to realize that he truly means it.

"I hate to interrupt, but I should probably go grab us some dinner," Claire says suddenly. Sam glances up at the clock and his eye widen. It's almost 7:30 already, much later than he thought it was—and almost half an hour after the time that Jody usually calls.

"No problemo," Foggy says in a terrible Spanish accent, grinning at Karen, who rolls her eyes. "We'll stay here and talk to Sam for a bit since Daredevil is still asleep." Claire nods, disappearing through the door, and Sam frowns, pulling his phone out of his pocket.
No missed calls from Jody.

"What's wrong?" Karen asks, noticing Sam's expression. He holds up the phone, eyebrows furrowing.

"My friend Jody has been calling every day at seven to check up on me," Sam explains. "She knows about Darkside, and after she saw me get shot on the news she insisted on getting daily updates until I'm out of the clinic."

"And she's never been late before?" Karen asks, and Sam shakes his head.

"I mean, she's been busy a couple of times, but she always calls me earlier, not later." He explains. "I know it's probably nothing, but I can't help but worry, you know?" Karen and Foggy both nod, offering Sam sympathetic smiles.

"Maybe you should call her." Foggy suggests. Sam is about to agree—he's already halfway through dialing her number—when his phone starts buzzing in his hand and he smiles, shaking his head.

"Ugh, I knew I was worrying about nothing," Sam says, smiling. "That's probably her." He answers the call and puts the phone up to his ear. "Hey, Jody, what's up?"

The reply Sam gets is pretty much the last thing he's expecting to hear, and he almost drops the phone into his lap in surprise as the smile drops from his face. Karen and Foggy both look on in confusion as Sam's face pales and his eyes widen.

"What?" He says automatically, both out of disbelief and because he actually didn't fully register the words that were spoken to him.

"I said that I'm sorry, Sam Winchester," the Demon's voice echoes in Sam's ear, sending a shiver down his spine, "but Jody can't come to the phone right now."
Chapter 32

"What did you do to her?" Sam asks, venom filling his voice in an almost subconscious reaction to his rapidly escalating fear. Karen and Foggy both frowned at Sam's tone, exchanging a look that Sam is too distracted to even attempt to decipher. Foggy looks like he's preparing to say something so Sam holds up a hand, silencing the lawyer before he can give away his presence. There's a pretty good chance that the Demon expects Sam to be alone—and he probably would be, if it weren't for the Demon's robber shooting Sam at the bank. The irony is not lost on Sam.

"Nothing, really." The Demon says, his voice too calm, too casual, too conversational. He sounds like he's discussing the weather or last night's game, not the woman he kidnapped. "She and her girls just got themselves swept up into something they aren't meant to be a part of." Correction: the woman and two teens he kidnapped. With the realization that the Demon has taken not only Jody but Claire and Alex as well, Sam's blood begins to boil and the weak grasp he had, up until that point, been maintaining on his emotions snaps like a stick crushed beneath a boot.

"Let them go." Sam orders, his tone darkening with every word as his spirit takes control of his body and his mind. His eyes flash yellow and out of the corner of his eye, he notices Foggy and Karen startling, growing more worried by the second. Sam forces his anger down, desperate to keep it in check. His yellow vision rapidly fades but the worry in Karen and Foggy's expressions doesn't.

"You know I can't do that, Sam." The Demon says, and Sam can hear the smirk in his voice. "Not without something in return."

"What do you want?" Sam asks, pretty much certain that he already knows the answer. The Demon won't give up Sam's friends' location. That's not the purpose of this call. This is leading to something far more sinister.

"I want you to turn yourself in. Deliver yourself to the NYPD." The Demon says. "Not as Darkside but as Sam Winchester. I want Sam Winchester to walk through the door of the nearest police precinct and give himself up to them."

"And if I don't?" Sam challenges and the Demon simply laughs.

"You will. Or your friends will die." He says, and the next emotion that rushes through Sam isn't anger but fear. It's still powerful enough to turn Sam's vision yellow once again, to force his senses into overdrive. "You have 48 hours, Winchester. The clock starts now." Sam focuses all of his attention on the call, desperate for some sign that will lead him to the Demon's lair, but all he hears is a faint scream in the background before the Demon chuckles and the line goes dead. Sam curses, throwing the phone at the wall so hard that both the plaster and the device shatter. Karen and Foggy both turn away from the newly-formed hole in the wall in order to stare at Sam, who takes a deep breath in a futile attempt to calm himself down. It's a mistake.

Without the Demon's words to focus on, Sam's senses turn outward, and his deep breath only serves to pull the overwhelming stench of disinfectant into Sam's nose, into his lungs. Sam coughs harshly, cursing again as his throat burns.

The disinfectant acts as a catalyst, opening the floodgates of Sam's mind to the world. He chokes on the smells and the tastes of the sterilized clinic, every breath drawing searing fumes into his lungs, scorching the inside of his throat. The sound of his own heartbeat pounds in his ears, a rhythmic beat consistently interrupted by outside noises, a cacophony of cars and trains and people.
A million people on Manhattan Island, a million heartbeats, a million pounding drums that add up to an uproar of sound that quickly has Sam clamping his hands over his ears, desperate for a respite.

A hand touches Sam's arm and his eyes fly open as he becomes uncomfortably aware of every wrinkle, every scar, every hill and valley in the invader's skin. Sam looks to the left and his yellow eyes burn, blinded by the pure strength of the soul that stares back at him—a powerful, overwhelming light that is like nothing Sam has ever seen before and yet is so familiar that, even though he can't see their face, offers Sam comfort. It's intimate, it's warming, but it's like staring into the sun from fifteen feet away and Sam can't stand it for more than a few seconds before he's forced to close his eyes, forced to turn away from the onslaught of light coming off of the figure.

"Hey, Sam, listen to me." A familiarly foreign voice says, somehow breaking through the screaming chaos with only a whisper. The hand on Sam's arm moves to his shoulder, the touch heavy enough that Sam can feel the reassuring pressure but light enough that it doesn't push the sharp, interwoven strands of Sam's shirt into his skin. The hand forms a bridge, a connection, a pathway from Sam to safety, from Sam to that voice that doesn't sound nearly as panicked as Sam feels.

"Help," Sam whispers, whimpers, his fingers curling over his ears, his knees curling toward his chest. His senses have betrayed him before, several times in the weeks since his escape from the demons, but never like this. Never have his senses been this harsh. And neither have his emotions. Sam has felt a lot of things in the past two and a half months, but it's never been this bad. His emotions, he realizes, feed into his abilities, power his senses up when he's worried or sad or angry. And so the fear of the Demon must have triggered this attack, this overload of senses that only led to more fear that only led to even more pain.

It's an endless cycle of terror and torture that Sam can't escape, can only close his eyes more tightly and pray for it to end.

"Sam, listen to me." That voice returns, begs to be heard through the cars and the rain and the beating drums. And with that voice comes softer sounds, blood rushing through veins like a river, breath moving through the air like the wind, and a single heartbeat, slow and steady. Sam reaches out and grabs that heartbeat, holds onto it and focuses on it and only it, ignoring the cars and the rain and the million other heartbeats.

"Sam, breathe." A new voice says, and a hand touches Sam's other shoulder. "Slowly. Come on." Sam obeys, following the instructions he was given, breathing in time with the wind and the river and the two heartbeats on either side with two different rhythms that somehow don't clash but complement each other. And as the sounds fade away, Sam opens his eyes, staring down at his jeans until the yellow fades and they return to some indistinguishable shade of blue. Only after the lingering scent of disinfectant has faded away does Sam trust himself enough to look up. When he does, he sees Karen standing in front of him with wide eyes, a bag of Chinese takeout in each hand. Claire is sitting on Sam's right, a worried look on her face, and Foggy is sitting on his left, his hand still firmly placed on Sam's shoulder and relief shining in his eyes.

"I'm okay." Sam chokes out after a minute, the burning taste still alive in the back of his throat. He's still breathing heavily but the air is free of disinfectant and the only heartbeat Sam can hear is his own. Claire immediately releases her hold and stands but Foggy's hand lingers a moment longer as an expression of sympathy flashes across his face. The moment passes as quickly as it came and Foggy pats Sam's shoulder awkwardly, climbing to his feet and taking one of the bags from Karen.

"What happened?" Claire asks, eyeing the shattered phone before returning her gaze to Sam.
"When's the last time this happened?"

"Not sure," Sam admits—he hasn't exactly been keeping track of his episodes of sensory overload. He probably should, if they're going to continue to be a regular occurrence. "I'm pretty sure that my abilities are influenced by my emotions. If I feel very strongly about something, particularly if it's an unexpected emotion, my senses get really powerful really quickly and I kind of freak out."

"Sensory overload." Foggy comments, glancing at the wall behind Sam's head—the one that Sam is almost certain borders Daredevil's room. "That sucks."

"What was the call about?" Karen asks. "It got you really angry, which I'm assuming is what caused the attack." Sam nods, biting the inside of his cheek.

"That wasn't Jody." He explains, wringing his hands. "It was the Demon." Claire, Karen, and Foggy all straighten somewhat, obviously understanding the gravity of Sam's words. "He has Jody and her daughters, Claire and Alex. He told me he'd kill them if I didn't give myself up to the police in the next 48 hours."

"You can't," Karen says immediately, and Sam nods. He knows that he can't do what the Demon says—and even if he did, there's no guarantee that if he did, the Demon would release Jody, Claire, and Alex. The villain's plan is obvious to Sam now, or at least his plans for his opposition. If the Demon tries to force Sam out of New York like he did before, or even if he tries to kill him, there's a pretty good chance that Sam will be back. But if Sam is arrested, if Sam is tried for the Lebanon bombing alongside his brother, he'll be imprisoned for the rest of his life—and New York will be free for the Demon's taking.

"I know that," Sam says, frowning. "But I can't fight him, either." He shifts, glancing at his injured shoulder as it offers a small twinge of protest. He almost expected his injuries to spontaneously heal like they did after the surgery on his leg, but apparently, all the sensory attack did was aggravate the bullet wound. "I've been going out these past few nights to stop petty crimes, muggers and shoplifters, but I can't take on the Demon like this. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm still injured, and the last time I ran into the Demon he beat me when I was at full capacity. If I go after him now, I'll just be getting myself killed."

"You've fought the Demon before?" Foggy asks curiously, and it dawns on Sam that he wasn't even in New York when his first encounter with the black-eyed villain happened.

"Not long after I first found myself in Hell's Kitchen, I took a trip to Maplewood, New Jersey because there was someone killing people in a small neighborhood there," Sam explains. "I was able to stop the killer, but I ran into the Demon in an alley when I was on my way out. We fought, I lost. He nearly killed me, he certainly could have killed me, but he offered me a deal instead. If I left New York within two weeks and never returned, he wouldn't kill me. He'd let me go." Sam hesitates, biting down harder on the inside of his cheek and frowning when he tastes blood. "Two weeks later I almost left, but I ran into Jody and Claire and they convinced me to stay and fight."

"Jody, Claire, and Alex, they're friends of yours from before Lebanon?" Karen asks.

"Close friends," Sam says. "I've known Jody for years, but Claire and Alex are more recent. They aren't actually Jody's biological daughters. Dean and I found them both on separate occasions, discovered that they were living on their own, and sent them to Jody to keep them safe. She's been protecting them, raising them, and all three of them have helped Dean and me out of more than one bad situation." Sam is startled by a sudden flash of memory, a brief image of a golden crack in the fabric of reality that fades before he can examine it further. "They shouldn't have been brought into this." He continues hesitantly, unsure what to think of the intruding image. "But I know why they
"Why?" Foggy urges and Sam smiles weakly, pushing the strange memory to the back of his mind.

"They've been helping me this whole time, ever since I got to Hell's Kitchen," Sam explains. "Jody is the sheriff of a small town in South Dakota. When Karen found the Demon's identity, Jody was the first person I called, and she agreed to spread it around. Alex is the one who first told me about the bank robberies. They're strong women, all of them, and I know that they can hold their own in a fight, but I don't think they can beat the Demon." Sam hesitates, picturing the three women he tried so hard to protect, to keep out of this mess. Claire, Alex, and Jody could easily take down an ordinary demon or even several, but the Demon is far from ordinary, and Sam is pretty sure that he has a lot more than a few other demons under his command. "I know I can't, not now. If I try to take the Demon on alone, I'm as good as dead. But if I don't, they'll be dead instead." The sound of a creaking door alerts Sam to a new presence and he turns, eyes widening as he takes in the raven-haired man standing in the doorway. At first, Sam doesn't even recognize the man, taking him to be a stranger. But then the man speaks, his words colored by the dark, rough tone that Sam immediately associates with one person: Daredevil.

"Then don't go alone."
Once he's past the initial shock of Daredevil's entrance, Sam finds himself giving the other vigilante a quick once-over. It's been a month, after all, since the two last met face to face, and that last meeting wasn't exactly pleasant. Now, with Claire's worries hanging over him, Sam is finally able to see for himself what exactly Daredevil has been going through.

It isn't exactly what he expected.

Daredevil is surprisingly smartly dressed for a guy who spent the past month in a hospital—he's wearing a light gray dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, a pair of black slacks, and black loafers. In his white t-shirt and sweatpants, Sam feels sorely underdressed. But despite initial appearances, it's clear that Daredevil still isn't at 100 percent. He's clearly supporting himself on the doorframe, although he's trying to play it off as a casual lean. His hazel eyes are bright but glazed, unfocused and staring at a point above Sam's head and to his left. He doesn't appear to be seriously physically injured but Sam can see several scars on his lower arms, mostly old and faded but a few just angry enough to have come from his encounter with the Demon last month. The most obvious of Daredevil's physical injuries is the jagged red line on his forehead, and Sam bites the inside of his cheek as images of a bullet lodged in the center of a red cowl are brought to the forefront of his mind.

Daredevil is obviously unsteady, obviously still healing, but he's on his feet—and considering the surprise on the faces of Karen, Foggy, and Claire, that's no small feat.

"Ma- Daredevil, what are you doing?" Claire asks, frowning at the man. For his part, Daredevil just smiles and nods in Karen and Foggy's direction; his eyes, Sam notes, never leave that point just left of Sam's head.

"I could hear you talking." Daredevil explains, lifting one hand and tapping his left ear. His other hand has been gripping the frame of the doorway a little too tightly to be casual, and when Daredevil drops his left hand to his side his right tightens around the wooden frame until his knuckles turn white. Claire glances at Karen and Foggy with concern in her eyes, apparently noticing the same things that Sam did—the little hints that Daredevil isn't quite as okay as he's pretending to be, with the clothes and the doorway. Daredevil, apparently aware of his friends' worry, is quick to deflect the attention away from himself. "I understand that Sam's friends are in danger?"

"The Demon has them," Foggy says, earning a glare from Claire. "What?" He asks, crossing his arms. "If he wants to know what's going on, we should tell him!"

"And not unlike myself, Sam is still injured." Daredevil continues, disregarding Foggy's comments. "So he can't take the Demon on by himself. The obvious solution is to not let him go by himself."

"You aren't ready to go out into the field either, Daredevil." Claire reminds the vigilante, who just smirks. "Even less so than Sam."

"And yet Sam has been parading around the city wearing my suit for the past four days." Daredevil says. Sam's heart skips a beat at the vigilante's indecipherable tone and Daredevil's eyes shift to Sam's chest as the hazel-eyed man offers Sam a lopsided grin. "Don't worry." He says, releasing the doorframe and rubbing his arm. "I'm glad you are. We can't have the city thinking I'm dead, can we?" He adds another comment under his breath, but Sam only catches the word 'Fisk'. 
"So if Sam is injured and Daredevil is even more injured, how exactly is anyone supposed to fight the Demon?" Karen asks with a frown.

"I can fight." Daredevil corrects. "Sam can fight. We just can't fight alone. Luckily, we are far from the only two vigilantes in New York City."

"You want to call the Defenders?" Claire asks, obviously surprised. Daredevil frowns, considering for a moment.

"I wasn't aware that we had a name." He comments, shaking his head. "But yes, that is what I was implying."

"Who?" Sam asks. He knew, of course, that there was a high concentration of superhuman individuals in and around Manhattan, but he didn't think that Daredevil really associated with any of them, much less joined an alliance or even a team.

"The Defenders are a group of vigilantes that Daredevil here got mixed up with last August," Karen explains. Her tone is casual enough but Sam can hear the tightness in her voice, and the accompanying glare that she sends an oblivious Daredevil tells Sam that something bad must have happened to the hazel-eyed vigilante during that encounter.

"I don't know," Sam says hesitantly, biting the inside of his cheek. "How many more people am I supposed to trust with my identity before it backfires on me?" The curious expression on Daredevil's face gives Sam pause as he realizes that his situation is probably unique. Karen and Foggy were probably Daredevil's friends before he was Daredevil, back when the horned vigilante was seen as an evil, hunted by the police. The danger of telling them the truth hinged on the fact that his alternate persona was dangerous, that they might turn him in for being a wanted vigilante.

In Sam's case, the opposite is true: Sam isn't worried about anyone knowing that he's Darkside—the yellow-eyed vigilante has a much better reputation than Sam does. It's people knowing Sam's real name that worries him.

Darkside isn't dangerous to the people of New York. Sam Winchester is.

After a minute, Daredevil frowns and pushes himself off of the doorway, taking a few confident steps into the room.

"Claire, call Luke for me, will you?" He requests, his tone oddly commanding even as he sways slightly. "Karen, Foggy, could I have a moment alone with Sam?" The three leave the room without much protest, and Sam notices that Claire has her phone to her ear before she's even cleared the doorway. Foggy closes the door as he leaves and Daredevil walks over to Sam's bed, sinking down beside him with a heavy sigh and offering Sam a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes—not that much of anything does.

For the past few months, Sam has been under the impression that Daredevil was an ordinary person with a lot of martial arts experience, but it's clear now that that just isn't true. Claire's comments about Sam being yet another person with superpowers, Foggy's sympathy for and understanding of sensory overload, even the red plastic covering the eyes of Daredevil's cowl all add up to one thing: Daredevil is blind.

Sam doesn't know how he didn't figure it out sooner because suddenly it's glaringly obvious.

"You're blind," Sam says bluntly, unable to find a way to nicely broach the subject. Daredevil just smirks, nodding.
"Very." He replies succinctly, angling his head to the side—a motion that, Sam suddenly realizes, positions his ear closer to Sam's mouth.

"But how do you do what you do?" Sam asks curiously. "The acrobatics and the combat and the jumping across rooftops?"

"I heard you having a panic attack earlier." Daredevil says, apparently choosing to ignore Sam's question. "Sensory overload, right?"

"When my emotions get out of control, so do my senses," Sam explains, beginning to see the direction in which Daredevil is heading. "I can hear the heartbeats of half of the city.

"That's pretty much my day-to-day life." Daredevil admits. "I lost my sight in an incident involving nuclear waste and a car accident. When I woke up in the hospital, my remaining four senses had overdeveloped. I could smell the last five meals someone had eaten, could feel the ink printed on a sheet of paper. It took a long time for me to get my senses under control. I probably had an attack like yours every other day for the first several years."

"That's why Foggy knew what was happening." Sam infers, and Daredevil nods.

"He was my college roommate." The vigilante says, breaking out into a wide grin. "We went to law school together and decided to make our own firm. Nelson and Murdock, avocados at law." Daredevil smirks at what is obviously an inside joke and Sam smiles—his Spanish is certainly rusty, but he still remembers the word for lawyer. Then Sam realizes what else Daredevil said and his eyes widen.

"Murdock?" Sam repeats, and Daredevil's smile somehow grows larger.

"You never got the chance to trust me with your identity. It was revealed to me without your permission, and you've been forced to hope that I'd keep your secret since that day in Claire's apartment almost two months ago." Daredevil explains. "You have quite literally saved my life at least twice now, so I think it's only fair that I finally return the favor and trust you with my name." Daredevil sticks out a hand, smiling so brightly that his glazed eyes sparkle. "Hello. I'm Matthew Murdock, but my friends call me Matt. I'm a blind attorney by day and a crazy guy who fights crime in a devil suit by night. It's nice to formally meet you." Sam shakes Matt's hand, offering a genuine smile that the other man can't even see.

"Hi, I'm Sam Winchester. Dead terrorist by day, yellow-eyed vigilante by night." Sam mimics Matt's introduction and the vigilante lets out a surprised laugh that quickly dissolves into a coughing fit. Once he's regained control of his breathing, Matt frowns, quickly sobering back up.

"I wanted to tell you sooner, but Claire insisted that I wait until I was more clear-headed," Matt admits. "I don't think she expected that day to come so soon, but all things considered I figured that now was as good a time as ever." He pauses, angling his head sharply in the opposite direction as his eyes shift over to the window momentarily. "Now, back to the matter at hand." Matt turns his attention back to Sam, his smile noticeably more strained. "Your friends, do you know where they are?"

"No idea," Sam says, biting down harder on his cheek. "The Demon wants me to turn myself in within 48 hours." Sam stiffens when his tongue hits the inside of his cheek and he tastes blood.

"Or he'll kill them." Matt infers, and Sam nods, stiffening when he remembers that Matt can't see the motion. To Sam's surprise, the vigilante laughs. "I can see you move, in a way." He explains, waving his hand through the air. "I can feel and hear the disturbance of the air whenever you
change position, especially when it's fast like a nod. My senses are heightened enough that they create a sort of picture of the world around me, a kind of radar sense. So I did know that you nodded." Sam smiles at this, relaxing a little bit after the brief bout of embarrassment. Matt is obviously comfortable with his disability in a way that Sam—who lacks both the time and the stability that Matt probably has had—never could be. And the blind lawyer's carefree attitude—a stark contrast from the strict character Sam has gotten used to expecting from Daredevil—is contagious, putting Sam at ease despite himself.

"I can't turn myself in, obviously, but I can't even find the Demon, much less actually fight him," Sam says, steering the conversation back on topic.

"I'm not sure how much help I'll be with finding your friends, but I can definitely help you fight," Matt says. "Claire is calling a couple of New York's other vigilantes, but if you don't mind, I'd like the two of us to visit one of them right now. She can probably help us with the more pressing of our two problems." Sam doesn't miss Matt's emphasis on the word 'our'—it's clear that the vigilante has adopted Sam's fight as his own, and Sam knows better than to try to convince him to stay away.

"Are you sure?" Sam asks cautiously. "Claire probably wouldn't be very happy with us if we left without telling her, and I'm still not entirely sure I want anyone else to know who I am."

"Claire won't mind as long as we both come back in one piece," Matt says, his gleeful tone suggesting that this is far from the first time he's disobeyed an order from the nurse. "And as for this vigilante, well, I'd tell you to wear a mask but she'd probably figure out your identity anyway." Sam frowns at this and Matt grins, standing and wiping his hands on his slacks. Sam grabs his discarded sock and pulls it on then reaches for his shoes as Matt continues. "Don't worry." He says reassuringly. "She's not really a fan of the police, or anyone else associated with law enforcement for that matter. I doubt she'll tell anyone anything."

"Where to?" Sam asks, tying his sneakers before climbing to his feet. He holds out a hand and Matt grins, rolling down his sleeves and putting his hand in Sam's. Sam hesitates, remembering the last time he teleported another person—that was Matt, too, except he was bleeding out and Sam almost passed out afterward.

Chapter 34

Sam teleports himself and Matt to the roof of the building that Matt designated, taking a moment to catch his breath—as he predicted, his body didn't react well to teleporting two people, and it takes him a minute to stave off the wave of dizziness that follows the action—and watching curiously as Matt heads straight for the roof-access door without a hint of hesitation. Sam knows, logically, that Daredevil's abilities haven't changed, but reconciling the fearless vigilante Sam first met in that alley so long ago with the blind man standing before him now isn't an easy feat.

"We don't have all day." Matt reminds gently, his tone carrying none of the impatience Sam would normally expect from those words. Sam nods, smiling weakly and following Matt into the apartment building. Matt heads straight into the elevator—which is conveniently waiting on the top floor—and Sam follows, pressing the button for the floor Matt requests and watching as the doors close and the elevator heads down into the building. After a few seconds of awkward silence, Matt reaches into his pocket, pulling out a pair of round sunglasses with red-tinted lenses and putting them on. He then pats his side, frowning when he comes up empty.

"Did you forget something?" Sam asks curiously, recalling from the previous nights that the spot on Matt's leg where he was searching is exactly where Daredevil holsters his billy club.

"My cane," Matt explains, smiling. "I don't necessarily need it to get around, but it's useful for keeping up appearances."

"Does Miss Jones not know who you are?" Sam asks, surprised, but Matt quickly shakes his head. "No, she figured out my identity pretty quickly." He admits, and the blush that spreads across his face tells Sam that Matt wasn't the one to tell Jones his name. "She just lives in a building with a lot of people who don't share her knowledge." Sam nods, shifting his weight subconsciously as he realizes for the first time that a crowded apartment building is probably the last place he should be walking around. Anyone Sam passes in the hallway could recognize him and call the cops, and he wouldn't know until it was far too late to make his escape. "What's wrong?" Matt asks, tilting his head to one side and sending Sam a worried look.

"Huh?" Sam replies distractedly, preoccupied with scanning the elevator for cameras. He knows better than this. He knows that he has to be more careful. His identity is something he cannot risk losing. It's the only thing he has.

"Your heart rate just sped up significantly," Matt explains. "What's bothering you?"

"Someone finding out that I'm Darkside isn't so much of an issue as someone finding out that I'm
Sam Winchester," Sam explains as the elevator comes to a stop. "Walking around Manhattan without a mask is more likely to get me arrested than walking around with one right now." The doors open, revealing a long hallway with old carpeting on the floors and peeling wallpaper. It doesn't look like the most pleasant place to live, but Sam has certainly seen worse. "The more time I spend in public, the more likely it is that someone will recognize me." Sam continues, earning a sympathetic look from Matt. The issue of Sam's easily-recognizable face is the reason that the only place in Manhattan Sam consistently returns to is the coffee shop in the warehouse district—Sam can't risk anyone seeing him enough times to get familiar.

"You'll be fine," Matt says, holding out an arm. Sam takes the blind man's elbow unthinkingly, stepping out of the elevator and nodding to the African American man who walks past the duo to head downstairs. The elevator doors close again and Matt nods to the door at the very end of the hallway. "That's Jessica's apartment. She appears to have a client with her." Sam frowns, straining to pick up on whatever small sound Matt heard that clued him in to a second presence in the room. As it turns out, he needn't have bothered—after a few seconds a loud yell echoes down the hallway, shortly followed by a body as a man is hurtled through the door, shattering the window in the process. Matt steps forward and Sam follows, hand still on Matt's elbow as they approach the newly-destroyed door. The man who was thrown through it stands, shouts a few choice words, and brushes the glass off of his jacket before turning and shoving past Sam and Matt, cursing the entire way to the elevator. Sam watches him go, turning back to the door at the end of the hallway just in time to see a young woman step into view, running a hand through her hair as she eyes the door and curses. She doesn't have the stature of someone who could throw a grown man through a door with enough force to shatter its window, but then again, looks can be deceiving—Matt certainly doesn't look like someone who could do acrobatics on a rooftop, either.

"That's the second door this month. Trish is gonna kill me." The woman mutters, looking up—most likely to see where the man went—and pausing when she sees Sam and Matt. "Murdock. Fancy seeing you here." The woman's tone suggests that she isn't very happy about the intrusion, but Sam isn't entirely sure—she could still be angry about the door. A few pieces of glass that still remain in the frame reveal that the window was custom-made, frosted with a couple of words printed on it. All Sam can make out is the first three letters of the word 'Alias'.

"Miss Jones," Matt says pleasantly, a striking contrast from the woman's tone. Sam raises an eyebrow at this, sending a curious look in Matt's direction, not that the lawyer can actually see it. The woman standing before them isn't exactly what Sam was expecting when Matt said he was taking Sam to see another vigilante. And yet, Jessica Jones looks just like Sam would expect from a vigilante had he not been introduced to Matt first.

"Who's your friend?" Jones asks, looking Sam up and down then immediately shaking her head. "You know what, nevermind. I don't want to know. Come on." She turns around, heading back into her apartment. "And watch your step," Jones calls over her shoulder. Matt shifts slightly and Sam drops his arm to his side, following the blind vigilante as he makes his way into the apartment, somehow avoiding every piece of glass on the floor without being able to see it. Sam, despite taking care to follow Matt's path, doesn't have quite as much luck, and he stiffens reflexively when his right foot comes down with a crunch on a particularly large piece of glass. It's only once he realizes which foot the glass went into that Sam relaxes, internally kicking himself for thinking even for a second that the glass going through his shoe would matter at all.

Unwilling to risk putting a shard of glass through the heel of the one foot he still has, Sam stares at his feet the rest of the way. Because of his caution, Sam moves much more slowly than Matt, and by the time he's made it past the glass minefield and into the apartment, Matt is already seated on a
dirty couch in the corner of the main room of Jessica Jones's home, his hands crossed in his lap and his covered eyes focused somewhere on Sam's left.

"Jessica, we need your help," Matt says once Sam has made it all the way into the living room. Sam surveys the small room—it kind of reminds him of the motel rooms he and Dean used to frequent: somewhat organized but not well-kept and not very clean—and decides against sitting on the couch with Matt, choosing instead to lean against the doorframe.

"Does Daredevil need my help, or does Sam Winchester?" Jones asks and Sam frowns, biting the inside of his cheek. Matt had warned that Jones would figure out who he was, but Sam hadn't expected her to connect the dots so fast.

It makes him wonder how many other people could figure out exactly who he was with one look.

"Both," Matt answers Jones's question, drawing Sam's attention back to the conversation. "Sam's friends were kidnapped by the Demon. He wants Sam to turn himself in to NYPD within 48 hours or he'll kill them." Jones frowns, giving Sam a curiously sympathetic look.

"Friends?" She asks simply, raising an eyebrow. Sam wants to be offended, but he can't say he's surprised that someone doubts that he—supposedly dead alleged terrorist that he is—has any friends, especially ones he's kept in enough contact with recently for the Demon to want to target them.

"Their names are Jody Mills, Claire Novak, and Alex Jones," Sam says. "I've known them all for several years. They're good people." Jones still looks skeptical and Sam pauses, frowning. How can he convince Jones that his friends aren't as bad as the world thinks he is? "Claire is 21, Alex is 19." He eventually says. "They deserve the chance to finish their lives." This seems to strike a chord with Jones, who nods and walks over to her desk, opening her laptop.

"So, what's your story?" Jones asks as she types, glancing at Matt before turning her attention to Sam. "If the pinnacle of Catholicism over there"—she nods in Matt's direction—"likes you enough not to offer you up to his favorite prosecutor on a silver platter, I'm guessing you aren't quite the psychopathic murderer that the world thinks you are." Sam shakes his head hesitantly, filing the fact that Daredevil is Catholic away to ponder on later.

"Sam wasn't responsible for the bombing of Lebanon, Kansas." Matt declares before Jones can broach another question Sam isn't really sure how to answer. "And we don't need you to find his friends, Jessica, we know where they are. They're with the Demon. We need to find him."

"For your information, I wasn't looking for his friends." Jones retorts, glaring at Matt, who just smiles. "I was actually digging into Sam Winchester here." Sam stiffens at this, shooting Matt a nervous look.

"Don't worry about it," Matt says, glancing in Sam's direction. "She runs background checks on everyone."

"Yeah, well, I don't usually find anything interesting," Jones replies, raising an eyebrow. "You really trust this guy, Murdock? He's done some pretty bad things, according to the Feds."

"He's saved my life twice in as many months," Matt replies, grinning. "Sam has earned my trust several times over. So has Darkside." Jones's eyebrow disappears into her hairline at this but she doesn't have a chance to respond before Matt starts to climb to his feet. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go look around Hell's Kitchen, hopefully discover the location of the Demon's base of operations." Sam and Jones both attempt to protest but Matt shakes his head, holding up a hand. "I
know Hell's Kitchen better than both of you, so I'm the most likely to be able to actually find him. Besides, I haven't been out in ages. I could really use the exercise." He heads for the door and Sam sidesteps out of the way, letting the blind vigilante pass.

"So, Darkside, huh?" Jones asks once Matt has disappeared down the hallway. Without Matt in the room, there's no one else for Jones to look at, so her eyes are focused on Sam with an intensity that instantly makes him uncomfortable. "What, get bored after getting accused of terrorism, decide to become a superhero?"

"Got kidnapped and experimented on, then escaped and decided to become a superhero." Sam corrects, pushing off of the door and walking across the room to take Matt's vacated spot on the couch. If Matt's super-heightened senses didn't find a problem with the dilapidated sofa, it can't possibly be as bad as it looks. "I got superpowers, figured I might as well put them to good use."

"How very noble of you," Jones says sarcastically, shutting her laptop somewhat aggressively and kicking her feet up on her desk. Apparently, she's found a line of questioning that she likes. "When'd this happen?"

"Right after Lebanon," Sam says, growing slightly more confident with each passing moment. Jones's indifference is, surprisingly, reassuring. And her snark is strikingly familiar. "Spent four months in a little concrete room, and when I escaped I ended up in Hell's Kitchen."

"Speaking of Lebanon, how'd your leg end up in the rubble?" Jones asks accusingly, her innocuous series of questions quickly turning into an interrogation.

"I was in the city when the bomb went off," Sam explains. "The leg they found was actually mine. The blast took it right off." Sam pulls up the right leg of his sweatpants and Jones sits up, eyeing Sam's metal ankle curiously.

"That sucks." She declares after a minute, punctuating the comment with a low whistle.

"Okay, my turn to ask some questions," Sam says, and Jones raises an eyebrow before smirking. "Shoot." She agrees, leaning back again and resting her hands behind her head.

"Who are the other Defenders? Claire and Matt said there were like four of you." Sam thought that the question was innocent enough but as soon as the words leave his mouth Jones groans dramatically, glaring at the ceiling.

"I told them not to use that stupid name. We aren't the Avengers, we don't need a freaking team name." She continues to glare at the ceiling for a minute, and Sam wonders exactly who the anger is directed at. Matt didn't seem to even be aware of the name, so Sam is curious as to who exactly came up with it. After a while, Jones's eyes move back to Sam. "There are four of us." She says. "Me, Murdock, Luke Cage, and Danny Rand."

"Rand?" Sam repeats, surprised to recognize the final name. "As in Rand Enterprises?" Jones nods, a small smirk playing on her face.

"He got stuck in some alternate universe and punched a dragon in the heart or something." She explains. "Calls himself the Immortal Iron Fist, divine protector of Koon Loon or something. I don't know. Kid sure packs a punch though." Jones rubs her head subconsciously and Sam briefly wonders how exactly the four vigilantes met—considering Jones and Daredevil's personalities, he doubts making a team was the original plan. "Luke is bulletproof. Completely." Jones continues. "Nothing can break his skin. Obviously, you already know Murdock. And I've got superstrength."
Sam nods, considering asking about how the four met but deciding against it.

"Luke and Danny, you trust them?" He asks instead, and Jones hesitates but nods.

"Luke is a friend." She says. "And Danny can be a bit thick sometimes, but his heart is in the right place. Neither of them will probably think very highly of you at first, but they'll help you find your friends."

"It isn't finding them that I'm worried about," Sam admits, rubbing the back of his neck. "The Demon is after me specifically, and he's already beat me once before. I need backup."

"You need a team." Jones corrects, scowling. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think Murdock made the right decision bringing you here. You go out there alone and you get yourself and your friends killed. You need extra hands."

"I need extra hands," Sam agrees. "But first, I do need to find them." He stands, walking over to Jones's desk. "Can I borrow your laptop?"

"What for?" Jones asks, but she pushes the computer in Sam's direction anyway. He opens the lid and heads to the class discussion board for his hacking class, skimming through the latest comments—with everything going on, it's been a few days since he last checked. A message from April 27 at 4:30 in the morning has Sam's alias tagged in it, so he expands the post, eyes widening as he reads the short message.

**Henry Michaels, I found him. Check your email. -AS**

Sam quickly closes out of the page, signing in to the email connecting to his account on the discussion board. There's exactly one message in his inbox, and it's from an ats5297@gmail.com and has no subject. When he opens the email, Sam discovers another short message and a screenshot of Google Maps with a pin on a warehouse in Hell's Kitchen. When Sam reads the second message, his heart skips a beat.

**Good luck, Darkside. - AS**

"What is it?" Jones asks curiously, walking around the desk and looking around Sam at the computer screen. "Who's A.S.?" She asks, and Sam shrugs.

"Andrew Smith. He's a hacker I met on an online discussion board. I sincerely doubt that he's using his real name, since I'm not either." He explains. "The important thing is, he just gave me the Demon's location."

"Good," Jones says, clapping her hands together. "I'll call Murdock back and we can get to work." Sam nods, sitting down in Jones's vacated chair and examining the map again as Jones pulls out her phone and leaves the room. The warehouse Smith marked isn't far from the area of the district where Sam spent his first month or so in Hell's Kitchen—in fact, it's on the same street as the warehouse Sam lived out of for the first couple of weeks. Has the Demon really been that close this whole time?

There's a possibility, of course, that Smith is lying, or that he isn't who he says he is. That he's leading Sam right into a trap. He does, after all, know that Sam—or rather, Henry Michaels—is Darkside, a fact that is certainly unnerving. But every other piece of information he's given Sam has checked out, and Sam can't risk wasting any more time searching for the Demon's base on his own—even with Jones and Matt helping, there's no telling that they'd be able to even confirm Smith's intel before the end of the Demon's time limit. Sam is going to have to trust Andrew Smith,
just like he's trusting Foggy, and Matt, and Jessica Jones, and probably Luke Cage and Danny Rand.

Lately, Sam has had to make a lot of decisions to put a lot of trust into a lot of people.

He just hopes that none of those decisions backfire on him.

Sam closes the lid of the computer as pressure begins to build behind his eyes, glancing in Jones's direction. She's still on the phone, but she doesn't appear to be talking to Matt anymore—instead, she keeps referring to the person on the other line as 'Luke'. When she catches Sam's eye, Jones gestures for him to join her in the kitchen. Sam climbs to his feet, stretching as he goes and heading for the kitchen.

Sam is only able to take a single step out from behind the desk before a sharp pain twists through his skull, sending him crashing to his knees as he presses both palms against his forehead. Despite the unexpectedness of the entire situation, Sam is intimately familiar with this feeling, so he doesn't panic, doesn't fight. Instead, he leans against the side of the desk, sending Jones what he hopes is a reassuring smile as the pain increases in intensity and he's forced to screw his eyes shut against the harsh onslaught of light.

A few seconds later, Sam is forcefully thrust into another world.
The room Sam finds himself standing in is bright and cheerful, with paper roses climbing the walls and soft carpet covering the floor beneath Sam's feet. The rounded windows are framed with yellow curtains and the soft tones of sunset—or sunrise, Sam isn't entirely sure which—shine through them, turning every feature of the room a shade of pink or orange or red. Sam is standing in the corner of the room farthest from the window, with a door on one side and a worn bookshelf on the other. In the opposite corner, in front of the window, three women sit on an old couch, the black tape over their mouths and around their wrists a stark contrast from the warm colors that mark the rest of the room.

Sam's automatic instinct is to memorize everything he sees, to commit every scratch on the door handle and every book on the shelf to memory and to analyze them all closely once he finds himself back in Jessica Jones's apartment. He knows perfectly well that what he's seeing isn't real, isn't happening right here, right now, but it might be happening somewhere—a vision of the future that's as clear as if Sam were there, just like his dreams of the bank robbery.

It's that thought that gives Sam pause, that forces him to stop for a moment and focus not on his surroundings but on his mind. The visions Sam had of the bank robbery were never entirely correct in terms of their location—his last, most powerful vision placed the events in the lobby of a bank that was solely a product of Sam's mind. The places where Sam's visions take place aren't the focus, aren't even accurate—they're figments of Sam's imagination, byproducts created by his mind so that the people and events he sees have a backdrop. Sam's mind created a bank in that last vision because he knew that it was going to happen in a bank. Since Sam doesn't really know what to expect from the Demon's lair, his mind created this instead.

When Sam scans the room again, he ignores the couch and the curtains and the bookshelf and focuses instead on the people, on Jody and Alex and Claire restrained and seated on an old couch. They look worried but not scared, disheveled but not injured. None of them look at Sam or give any indication that they know that he's there, which makes him wonder if this future event is one he's even a part of. The answer to that question comes when the door to Sam's left opens and Norman Whitmore walks in and walks past Sam, heading for the three women. Their eyes follow him across the room and pass over Sam like he isn't even there, focused on Whitmore—on the Demon—with unerring constancy. The Demon smiles at the three women and says something to them that never reaches Sam's ears, something that nonetheless sends a shiver down Sam's spine. He turns away from the women and scans the room, eyes passing right over Sam the first time around but pausing the second. Sam stiffens as the Demon's eyes suddenly melt away into darkness, and suddenly there are people everywhere, black-eyed figures all over the small room. Sam quickly memorizes their positions, not within the room but relative to his friends and to the Demon. There are three demons standing behind the couch, two in front, and one to the left—they're forming a barrier between Sam and his friends, a barrier he has no hope of breaching alone.

The Demon's ever-present sinister smile widens and he lifts one hand. One of his henchmen pulls the curtains closed, bathing the room in a deep yellow light. Sam raises his fists and the Demon raises an empty palm, forcing Sam down to his knees and drawing an angel blade from his coat. The yellow tones of the room brighten as the sun rises in the window, and the light reflects off of the blade into Sam's eyes, turning the world white as the blade comes down without a sound.

The next thing Sam sees is the glint of worry in a pair of green eyes, and for a split second he thinks that his brother is standing before him, that he's been thrust into another vision or he's dreaming or even that he's trapped in a concrete cell with his brother by his side. But after a
moment Sam’s vision focuses and he catches a glimpse of black hair, and he realizes that the face before him is most certainly not his brother’s—and not even male at all. Sam blinks rapidly, clearing the remains of the white light from his vision until he can see the expression of worry on Jessica Jones’s face, one that quickly melts into impassive annoyance once she sees that Sam is conscious. Jones straightens and steps back and Sam sits up, resting his head against the side of the desk and groaning when his brain pounds in his skull—a residual effect of Sam’s visions of old, and one that he was really hoping would be left in the past.

"Sam, are you okay?" Matt asks, stepping into Sam’s field of vision from the kitchen. He’s obtained a long white cane that’s currently shoved under one arm, and his windswept hair and crooked glasses serve to both imply that he just arrived and offer up the entertaining mental image of a blind man suddenly breaking into a sprint and disappearing into an apartment building, the urgency of his situation apparently giving him the ability to navigate the stairs.

"How long?" Sam croaks, his tongue heavy and his throat void of moisture. Matt frowns, shifting his weight uncomfortably as he attempts to formulate an answer, but Jones just nods and smiles grimly.

"About fifteen minutes." She says, nodding to Matt. "I called Matt to come back just before you passed out, then called him again about a minute after you hit the floor. He just got back like thirty seconds before you woke up." Sam nods, grabbing the edge of the desk and gritting his teeth as he pulls himself to his feet. His left knee protests the motion and Sam frowns, pretty sure that the next time he changes his jeans he’ll find a round bruise on his kneecap imprinted with the pattern of Jones’s floor.

"Sam, what happened?" Matt asks, sounding concerned and somewhat guilty. "Should we go back to the clinic? I didn't realize you were still injured." Sam shakes his head, biting the inside of his cheek. While he’s been pretty open with Matt about most of his abilities—which was a given, since Matt was there when he discovered most of them—the visions were something that Sam was hoping to not have to share. Unfortunately, he doesn’t appear to have much of a choice now.

"That wasn’t... That wasn’t caused by an injury." Sam admits, rubbing his forehead in an attempt to soothe the residual twinges of pain that continue to make themselves known. "It was a vision."

"What, so now you're clairvoyant?" Jones asks, unimpressed. She crosses her arms, raising an eyebrow when Sam just nods.

"It's kind of annoying," Sam says, smiling weakly when Jones's eyebrows furrow. "I have no control over what I see," Sam explains. "The visions usually happen when I'm asleep, but in the rare chance that I have one while I'm awake, well..." He trails off, rubbing his forehead once more and gesturing to the floor at his feet.

"You pass out on the spot." Jones finishes the thought and Sam nods gratefully.

"I've had a few since I arrived in Hell's Kitchen, mostly centered around the bank robbery where I got shot." Sam doesn't elaborate more than that, assuming that Jones already knows the story. "I saw my friends, with the Demon. They were tied up, he was about to kill me. I woke up before I got stabbed, though."

"Did you see anything that could help us? Anything that could give us an idea of the location where the Demon is keeping your friends?" Matt asks, taking the revelation of Sam's visions in stride.

"Actually, we found the Demon's base before this whole vision thing happened," Jones admits.
"That's the reason I called you the first time."

"So, where is he?" Matt asks seriously, Sam's vision forgotten in light of this new, more pertinent information.

"A warehouse in Hell's Kitchen about two blocks from the alley where we first met," Sam says, walking over to the laptop and checking the screen to confirm his words. Matt nods, lightly biting his upper lip as he considers the new information.

"And you're sure that your friends are being kept at this base?" Matt asks after a minute.

"I haven't had many encounters with the Demon, but I know his type. They'll be there." Sam says with a confidence that he doesn't really feel.

"So, what's our plan of attack?" Jones asks. "Luke and Danny are on their way over right now."

"Actually, can we head somewhere else?" Sam replies, earning a glare from the raven-haired woman as she crosses her arms, raising an eyebrow in a silent question. "There are some things I need to grab." Sam elaborates, feeling somewhat like a kid being reprimanded by their parent.

"Me too," Matt states, grinning. "Which reminds me, Sam, where is my suit?" Jones's eyebrow lifts a little higher at this as she apparently realizes that Matt was not the one responsible for the various Daredevil sightings of the past few days.

"It's at Karen's apartment, along with my suit and the other thing I need to grab," Sam explains.

"You people and your supersuits," Jones grumbles, disappearing into her bedroom. She returns a moment later with a gray scarf slung over one shoulder and a leather jacket halfway up her arm. Sam raises an eyebrow and Jones scowls, sending him a look that dares him to comment.

Sam knows better than to challenge an angry woman.

After she's pulled on the jacket, Jones loops the scarf around her neck and nods to Sam. "So, let's get on with it. We've got roughly 36 hours before the Demon's grace period expires." Matt holds out a hand and Sam takes it, frowning.

"I don't think I can take all of us at once, so I'll come back and get you, okay?" He decides, offering Jones a shy smile. The raven-haired woman replies with a grin that is clearly fake, shrugging.

"I mean, or we could just walk." She suggests sarcastically. "But no, we'll go the fun way." It's obviously not a definitive answer but Sam takes it as one, nodding and picturing Karen's—hopefully empty—apartment and taking himself and Matt there. He directs the blind vigilante toward the cabinet where Sam knows Karen has stowed both of their suits and Sam's duffel bag and returns to the apartment, offering a hand to Jones. "I still think that teleporting is stupid." Jones declares as she takes one last survey of the room, swiping a pair of fingerless gray gloves off of the corner of her desk before taking Sam's hand and nodding. "Let's go save the world." Sam teleports them back to Karen's apartment, where they find Matt standing over the two duffel bags, a defined frown on his face.

"What's wrong?" Sam asks, confused—it's been thirty seconds since he left Matt at the apartment, what could have possibly happened in that time? Matt doesn't answer verbally—instead, he just reaches into Sam's duffel bag, pulling out a long silver blade and holding it out to Sam.

"What is this?" He asks as Sam takes the weapon, grimacing. "I didn't think you used weapons." Matt's tone becomes accusatory and Jones frowns, eyeing the blade. Things just got a lot more...
The other thing that Sam was going to pick up before the fight with the Demon was the angel blade that Claire Novak gave him in Queens—not to use to kill the Demon but as a last resort, if everything else went wrong and whatever plan Sam and the Defenders decide on fell apart. Sam was really hoping that no one else would see the weapon, either here or during the final fight. After all, it's only a precaution. Of course, Sam forgot to account for Matt's heightened senses finding the angel blade before Sam even had time to think about concealing it.

"I don't. Not normally." Sam defends himself, his heart picking up its pace as Matt raises an eyebrow skeptically. "The Demon is different." Jones leaves Sam's side and collapses onto the couch, kicking up her feet and watching the exchange with curiosity thinly disguised as boredom.

"We can't just stab him," Matt says. "He may be a crime boss, but he's still human."

Every argument that Sam could have vocalized dies away in his throat at those words.

*He's still human.* Matt and Jones and their friends don't know the truth about the Demon, don't know how powerful he truly is. Sam doesn't want to kill the Demon, doesn't want to injure the innocent man he's using as his vessel, but what if it comes to that? What if something goes wrong and the Defenders are forced to aim to kill? Their techniques won't work on the Demon, won't do anything but make him laugh. If the Defenders shoot to kill, the Demon will snap them in half like twigs. Sam is handing his new friends a death sentence if he doesn't at least give them a fair warning.

And Matt, Matt Murdock who came to Sam's aid when he was just a man running from shadows and who stayed by his side even though he was a wanted terrorist, he deserves to know the truth. Matt deserves to know about the world that Sam has been a part of his entire life, the world that Sam brought him into the second he took pity on a stranger with a metal leg. Matt deserves to know what the Demon can do, but he deserves even more than that—he deserves to know that the Demon isn't the only black-eyed man in the world, that the Demon is far from the worst threat out there.

Sam is suddenly overwhelmed by the urge to tell Matt everything, everything that happened before Lebanon and everything he remembers of what happened afterward, not to warn him or to make him understand or to justify anything Sam has done but to thank him for everything he's done for Sam in the past two months. And Sam almost does it. He almost tells Matt everything.

But then Sam sees Jessica Jones sitting on the couch watching his every move, and he hesitates because Matt is a friend but Jones is a stranger. Sam met her less than an hour ago, had never even heard of her an hour before that.He knows where she lives and he knows where she works but he doesn't know *her.*

And yet there's something familiar in those bright green eyes, something comforting in her snark and her sarcasm and her messy apartment. Jessica Jones is a stranger but she reminds Sam of a friend, of a brother, of green eyes and snark and a messy motel room. And Sam—who spent his life learning how to look past the first layer of guarded green eyes and how to decipher what was hidden beneath—takes one look at Jessica Jones and sees the pain and the fear and the guilt that all swirl just below the surface, masked by the snark and the sarcasm and the indifference and the anger. And all of that, that complicated person that Sam doesn't know at all and yet knows so well, that convinces Sam that Jessica Jones is someone he can trust with his life, someone he can trust with his secrets.

"*We can't just stab him,*" Matt says again in Sam's mind, over and over and over. "*He may be a*
crime boss, but he's still human.” And Sam looks up, looks at Matt's accusations and concern and Jessica's pain and fear and indifference, and he smiles.

"Well, see, here's the thing," Sam says before he can stop himself, before he can change his mind and run away and try to save his friends alone just like he always has. This extended stay in New York City is Sam's chance to start over, to fix everything that went wrong in the life of before and to make everything better. He can't go back to doing things on his own because that's what got him here in the first place. That's what he's trying to avoid. And trusting people, letting people help him, that's step one. "Here's the thing," Sam says again, biting his cheek and averting his eyes but standing his ground, convincing himself with every word that this is exactly what he needs to do. "The Demon isn't human."

"He isn't?" Matt asks, and he doesn't sound angry anymore, he sounds curious, he sounds worried, and it's exactly the push Sam needs.

"No, he's a demon. A real one." And just like that, Sam is telling Matt and Jessica everything, from a baby in a crib and a few drops of blood to bombs and needles and an army of men with black eyes.

And when he's finished telling his story, Matt and Jessica don't argue or protest or kick Sam to the curb. They nod and they agree and they set everything that isn't relevant aside for later and focus on what is. And then, armed with all of the information that they need, Matt and Jessica and Sam make a plan to take down the demon terrorizing Manhattan island.

And for the first time since he found himself in Hell's Kitchen with one and a half legs and four months of missing memories, Sam feels right at home.
Chapter 36

It was 3 am by the time Sam, Matt, and Jessica finished laying out the extremely detailed and debated plans A, B, and C. While historically Sam has never detailed his future carefully—if at all—this is something he cannot afford to mess up. The lives of people who never should have gotten involved are at stake; if Sam lets any one of them get hurt, he'll never forgive himself. Jody, Claire, and Alex have already been kidnapped. Matt already nearly died. Sam can't stand to lose one of his friends, old or new. So even though three fully-fledged and fully vetted plans are probably a bit on the extreme side, Sam doesn't care. He's not letting anyone else get injured fighting his fight.

The trio of vigilantes ended up at Matt's apartment after Karen came home to find them in her living room and kicked them out—although not before promising to tell Claire Temple and Foggy what was going on. At around midnight, Jessica called Danny and Luke to tell them where to go the next morning—the original meeting was pushed back a day after Sam passed out at Jessica's apartment—and Matt decided that Jessica and Sam should spend the night, rather than regrouping the next day.

When Sam wakes up a short while later with an uncomfortable crick in his neck—he's too tall to sleep on Matt's couch but didn't want to take the blind man's bed—and a quilt draped over his legs that wasn't there when he fell asleep, he's not entirely surprised to find two strangers standing in the kitchen with Jessica and Matt. He is, however, surprised to see that everyone was awake before him.

"I wanted to wake you up sooner but Murdock insisted that you needed your beauty sleep," Jessica comments when Sam checks the clock and realizes that it's well after ten. At Jessica's words, Sam turns his attention to Matt, who shrugs and smiles innocently. The blind man is, Sam notes with a degree of surprise, already wearing his Daredevil armor—other than the helmet, which is resting on the counter beside him.

"You've been having trouble sleeping at the clinic. I figured you probably needed the rest." Matt explains. Sam just shakes his head, accepting the lawyer's decision for what it is—Sam can't remember the last time he wasn't in need of sleep, but he's not going to tell Matt that—and turning to examine the two newcomers.

"I'm assuming that is the rest of your team?" Sam asks after a minute, lifting a hand in greeting to the tall, muscular black man leaning against the counter and the short, skinny white boy with curly blond hair perched on the bar stool beside him. They both return the wave somewhat cautiously, obviously fully aware of Sam's identity and all that that entails. Sam takes a moment to wonder exactly how much Jessica and Matt told the two other vigilantes about Sam before he woke up.

"We're not a team," Jessica mutters under her breath as Matt rounds the island, waving a hand in the general direction of the duo.

"This is Luke Cage, bulletproof man"—Matt angles his head toward the black man, who waves again—"and Danny Rand, the Immortal Iron Fist." The blond smiles, offering another wave of his own.

"Sam Winchester, aka Darkside," Sam replies, frowning. "I'm assuming you both already knew that." The unusual pair nods in unison, both still eyeing Sam with the same hesitance that Jessica did when she first learned his identity—the same hesitance that Sam will probably have to deal with anytime someone learns his name for the rest of his life. "I didn't cause the Lebanon
bombing." Sam defends, suddenly desperate to stop the judging eyes and the hesitance and the worry that clouds the expressions of the two vigilantes, the two heroes standing before him.

Sam is far from innocent, in his life and even in the bombing itself. He's fully aware that his presence in Lebanon is what caused the explosion, and the blood of the 52 people who died as a result is on his hands, regardless of if it was those hands that planted the bomb in the first place. But despite his guilt, Sam doesn't want to get these looks of apprehension and anxiety and barely-shadowed anger.

Sam Winchester is guilty. That fact was set in stone the moment the bomb went off in Lebanon. But Sam doesn't want to be Sam Winchester. He doesn't want to continue to hold on to that name that was poisoned by destiny long before demons dreamed of destroying a city, long before two brothers were sent on a quest to find their father, to save the world. Sam Winchester is poisoned, infected, guilty. Sam is just trying to find his way in a world that refuses to give him a second chance.

It's a pipe dream and he knows it.

Sam pushes the quilt off of his legs, exposing the smooth metal foot that, in the month since he received it, has begun to rust over.

"My brother and I were framed." Sam continues as the two new vigilantes acknowledge his prosthetic leg with interest, most likely connecting it to the remains found in Kansas. "And I promise you that I'm not the person you think I am... not that I expect you to take my word for it." Luke and Danny still look hesitant, still look concerned, but Sam has run out of excuses, run out of things to say. With an exasperated sigh, Jessica Jones steps up to the plate.

"He's just another dude who got himself stuck in some real shit." She says in a tone that dares either of the men to argue. They exchange a look but stay quiet, and after a pointed look from the dark-haired woman, Luke's eyes soften and he nods. "Now then"—Jessica clasps her hands together loudly and Matt flinches away from the sound with a frown—"can we please get to work? There are three kidnapped women patiently waiting for Sam here to come save them, and we're kind of on the clock." Just like that, any lingering hesitation is gone from Luke and Danny's expressions and they both straighten, focusing their attention on Sam not as a villain but as an ally. That's the life of a vigilante, Sam figures. Putting your own issues aside for the good of others.

"Where to?" Luke asks gruffly as Sam climbs to his feet, walking over to the corner of the room where he stowed his bag. He's already dressed in a pair of black jeans and a black t-shirt so it only takes a few seconds for him to grab the rest of what he'll need.

"Abandoned warehouse on 50th," Jessica says as Sam zips up his jacket and pulls on his gloves. "It's the Demon's home base, and we're pretty sure that it's also where he's keeping Sam's friends." Sam ties his mask around his face, nodding to Matt, who pulls on his cowl.

"Pretty sure?" Luke asks skeptically, sending Sam another hesitant look. "I'm going to need a little more than 'pretty sure'."

"Really pretty sure," Sam says, a small smile forming on his face at the familiar expression. "I'll be sure once we get there." He adds, recalling the moment that he realized the Demon's soul—or lack thereof—wasn't nearly as bright as the humans nearby. If Sam's friends are in the warehouse, their souls should be significantly more noticeable than the demons that most likely surround them.

"So, are we just walking?" Danny asks, frowning when Sam pulls the angel blade out of his duffel bag and shoves it into his jacket—apparently, none of the Defenders are big fans of weapons. The
blond turns to Matt, scanning his face for some semblance of worry about Sam's silver weapon—Luke, Sam notices, does the same to Jessica. After a minute, the two newcomers turn back to Sam, and Danny shrugs, offering Sam a shy smile. Apparently, Daredevil and Jessica's lack of worry has been interpreted as permission for Sam to arm himself.

Sam feels somewhat like he's just passed a test he didn't know he was taking.

"I was thinking we teleport," Sam replies, eyes flashing yellow as he steps toward the group. A smirk finds its way to his face when Danny jumps and Luke stiffens—it's obvious that neither of them was expecting the final piece of Sam's disguise. Even Jessica looks at least a little bit surprised, although she certainly hides it better. "I can only take one person at a time, so I'll teleport Jessica first, then Luke, Danny, and Matt last. Luke, Danny, you two know the plan?" The duo both nod and Sam walks over to Jessica, holding out a hand.

"This better work, Winchester," Jessica says as she takes Sam's hand, squeezing it tightly. Sam takes them both to the roof of the building directly across the street from the warehouse that Andrew Smith designated, and they look out over the edge together. Several dozen men are patrolling the street directly below. Jessica turns to Sam with a raised eyebrow and Sam just shrugs uncomfortably. The Demon has a lot more men than they were expecting. He wouldn't be surprised if Jessica changed her mind about helping him now that she can see how dangerous this really is—because every single man in the street is a demon.

To Sam's surprise, Jessica just grins, hitting her fist against her palm.

"I don't have nearly enough alcohol in my system to deal with this," Jessica says, her grin never wavering. "But you know what? I don't really mind."

Sam takes that as his cue to return to Matt's apartment, grabbing the other Defenders one by one.

By the time all five vigilantes are on the roof and the plan has been hashed over once again—and adjusted to account for the unexpectedly large number of demons milling about—another hour has passed. Sam grows more and more uncomfortable as the Demon's deadline grows closer, and his anxieties are projected onto the Defenders, making everyone tense. Sensing Sam's worry, Matt offers one final tip to Luke and Danny—suggesting that they knock the demons out rather than trying to injure them—and decides that it's time to put the plan into motion.

It's time to stop the Demon once and for all.

The first to leave the rooftop is Matt, who jumps down to the street, landing gracefully and taking out two demons with one swing of his billy club. Jessica hits the ground soon after and starts punching every demon who approaches her, sending them flying into the ground, the walls of the buildings, and each other—her strength, Sam is surprised to see, is almost equal to that of the demons. After Matt and Jessica have dispatched most of the guards, Luke jumps down after them and Sam teleports himself and Danny to the ground.

A second wave of demonic attackers make their appearance and Sam watches curiously as Danny flips an approaching demon over his shoulder, carrying the momentum into a series of complicated moves that ends with a backflip and a flurry of kicks—Sam would think that Danny was just showing off if the routine hadn't left four demons on the ground in varied stages of unconsciousness. As Danny jumps into the fight with Jessica and Matt, Luke walks over to Sam, slamming two demons' heads into each other and letting them slump to the ground as he makes his approach. Once their immediate area is clear of demons, Luke lifts an eyebrow in silent question and Sam nods, leaving Matt, Jessica, and Danny behind as he heads for the door. Sam and Luke easily dispatch the two demons standing guard at the door and make their way inside.
The inside of the warehouse is one large open room, with concrete walls and concrete floors and pretty much nothing else of interest. There's next to no furnishings or machinery, the windows are set high on the walls and most are either broken or coated in dust, and other than Sam and Luke, the room is pretty much deserted. There's not a single demon in sight and the only lifeforms that even Sam's enhanced vision can make out are the three women sitting in the far corner, their mouths and wrists secured with black duct tape. Before Sam can run to his friends, a loud creaking sound starts behind him. Sam and Luke both spin around and Sam catches a glimpse of a glowing yellow fist before the heavy metal doors slam shut, trapping the two vigilantes inside. When Sam turns back around, Norman Whitmore is standing directly between him and his friends, his black eyes shining in the low light of the room.

"Sam Winchester." The Demon says, shaking his head. "And here I thought you weren't going to show." Sam makes his way toward the Demon without much thought, the yellow in his vision growing brighter by the second as he allows the anger that's been building inside him for the past two months—anger at the Demon, at the world, at himself—to take over. The Demon pulls a gun from his jacket and points the weapon at Sam, shooting six times in quick succession. Before Sam has time to even think about stopping the bullets telekinetically, Luke is standing in front of him, taking the shots square in the chest. All six rounds bounce harmlessly off of Luke's chest, and for the first time, Sam sees a flash of fear in the Demon's eyes.

The Demon didn't count on Sam having backup, but he planned for it. What he never planned for was Sam having backup with superpowers.

Determined to stop this as quickly as possible, Sam closes his eyes, picturing the opposite side of the warehouse that holds his friends. Picturing himself standing beside them. Picturing himself standing at the Demon's back, between him and the three women he kidnapped.

When Sam opens his eyes, he hasn't moved an inch.

"Sorry, Sammy, no teleporting allowed." The Demon says with a smirk, apparently well aware of Sam's plan. He gestures to the far right corner of the room and Sam frowns when he sees the sigil painted onto the concrete. Eyes widening, Sam exchanges a nervous glance with Luke before turning back to the Demon, his stance significantly less confident than it was a moment ago.

Plan A has just gone down the drain.

"I don't have to teleport," Sam says after a minute—there's a reason that he, Matt, and Jessica made two other plans, after all—lifting his right hand and flicking it roughly to the side. The gun is torn from the Demon's hand as Sam runs forward, sending a hard punch to the villain's chest that sends him stumbling backward. The surprised grunt that escapes the Demon at the unexpected impact acts as an alert of some kind, and soon the room is swarming with demons.

"Get him, I've got this!" Luke yells before Sam can even worry, and Sam glances over his shoulder and watches as Luke punches one demon so hard that it flies into a wall so hard that the foundation cracks. Sam nods, turning back to the Demon just in time to duck and dodge a punch that was directed at his jaw but instead goes sailing over his head.

"So, I see you've made some friends." The Demon says, easily dodging Sam's attacks and countering with several of his own that make contact. Sam is far from a slow fighter but he can't come close to matching the Demon's speed, so he has to fight smart, not hard—a strategy that isn't as effective in practice as Sam hoped it would be. "I'm proud of you, Sammy. You've grown so much."

"Shut up," Sam replies through gritted teeth, grunting in pain when a strong punch from the
Demon connects with his still-injured shoulder. A surprised groan from somewhere behind Sam has him looking over his shoulder, and he stiffens when he discovers that Luke is being restrained by four demons, although it appears to be a struggle for them to keep the muscled man down.

A kick from the Demon hits Sam square in the chest and he stumbles backward, head whipping back around and eyes landing on the black-eyed man in question as he smirks, wiping a bit of blood from a newly-broken nose off of his upper lip.

"Still not a very good fighter, though." The Demon continues his little speech as Sam steadies himself and raises his fists. "Too easily distracted." Before Sam can counter with his words or with his fists, loud, frantic banging fills his ears and he realizes with horror that Matt, Jessica, and Danny can't get into the room.

Plan B is out now, too.

Sam reaches into his jacket and pulls out the angel blade, brandishing it confidently and watching with satisfaction as the Demon backpedals a few steps, obviously surprised. One thing that Sam was counting on was that the Demon wouldn't know about Claire Novak's help when Sam went to Queens, about the weapons stash that she gave him. This angel blade is something that Sam shouldn't have, something that the Demon would never have thought he could get his hands on.

It's exactly what Sam was hoping for.

The Demon, obviously unnerved, takes another step back, and Sam fills the gap with a step of his own.

"Not so confident now, are you?" He teases, the world around him growing brighter with every step—no longer from anger but from rage. A hand grabs Sam's shoulder and he spins around, pushing his free hand out palm-first and watching as the demon flies backward into Luke and his captors, sending all six bodies to the floor in a heap.

"Oh, Sammy, I'm so happy." The Demon says, the confidence in his tone wavering but still present, still unyielding. "You've made so much progress since Asmodeus first fed you his blood." Sam falters at this, his mind whirring.

He remembers Asmodeus giving him demon blood, but he always injected it into Sam's bloodstream, into his heart. That's the only reason it even worked, the only reason it gave Sam these abilities.

"You didn't know?" The Demon asks, his voice taking on a tone of mock surprise as he quirks an eyebrow. "Asmodeus tried a page from his brother Azazel's book first. Held you down and dripped some of his blood into your mouth. And if I recall correctly, you quite liked it."

Sam stiffens, muscles tensing as a pressure begins to build in the back of his mind. He knows what the Demon is doing, knows that he has to fight it, but he doesn't know if he can. Doesn't know if he's strong enough, if it's even possible to resist at all.

"Now, it may have been because you were still delirious—losing a leg will do that to you—but you seemed to really want that blood." The Demon's smile stretches from ear to ear as Sam stumbles, his flesh and bone leg buckling beneath him. "In fact, I recall that you begged him for it."

Sam doesn't even have time to process the Demon's last accusation before he's knocked off of his feet by the sheer force of the memory.

_The room is dark, but Sam can still see the blood covering the walls, the ceiling, the table that he's_
tied to. His right leg screams every time the man at the end of the table prods it, the sick grin on his face spreading wider with each whimper that escapes Sam's chapped lips. Sam lifts his head as far as he can, craning his neck to see what it is that the man is doing—and nearly passing out when he catches a glimpse of the mangled remains of his right leg. The leg isn't restrained like Sam's left one is, but that doesn't really matter—the bloody, torn flesh barely extends past Sam's knee, and thanks to the debilitating pain that comes with every small movement, there isn't really much Sam could do with it even if the rest of him was free.

The figure at the end of the table suddenly moves around it, shoving a blood-soaked pen into the breast pocket of his pristine white suit as he comes to a stop beside Sam's head. Sam tries to follow the man with his eyes but his vision won't stop spinning, won't stop swirling, and in the slight relief from the intense pain Sam is suddenly overwhelmed by exhaustion—he can barely keep his eyes open at all.

The man rolls up his sleeve and takes a knife from someone outside of Sam's view, bringing the blade down on his exposed forearm and cutting a shallow line into it. He holds his bleeding arm over Sam's head and Sam turns away, clamps his mouth shut—he can barely remember what's going on, can barely keep track of his scattered memories, has no idea where he is or how he got there, but he knows that he can't let any of that poison pass his lips.

The man has other ideas.

A second pair of hands grabs Sam's head. One grabs a fistful of his hair and slams his head down against the table and the other grabs his lower jaw, pulling it down and forcing Sam's mouth open. The man in the white suit smirks, squeezing his injured arm lightly and letting some of the dark red blood fall directly into Sam's mouth. Sam tries to spit it out but the hands force his mouth shut, cover his mouth and pinch his nose until dark spots fill his vision and he's forced to reflexively swallow.

The heat flows down his throat and spreads through his veins, but it doesn't spread out—the concentrated flow moves straight into his mangled leg, dulling some of that never-ending pain. As the poison does its work, only one thought becomes clear in Sam's muddy mind: he needs more. He needs relief from that pain, and this liquid, this blood, this poison, is giving it to him.

When the hands release their hold on Sam's head, he opens his mouth all on his own.

And as more blood falls unobstructed between Sam's lips, the man in the white suit smiles, his yellow eyes swirling.

The yellow of Asmodeus's eyes colors the world and Sam is suddenly jerked back into reality. He finds himself face to face with a silver blade and recoils instinctively, eyes wide as he looks up and meets the pure black eyes of the Demon. Sam is on his knees, now, suspended in place by one of the Demon's hands while his own angel blade rests harmlessly in the other. Sam tries to move his head, tries to look behind him, but finds himself completely frozen, forced to stare only into the Demon's eyes, forced to kneel before him powerlessly, hopelessly.

Sam doesn't need to be able to see the room behind him to know that Luke has once again been restrained—he can hear the bulletproof man's frustrated grunts as he tries and fails to free himself. Sam doesn't need to be able to see outside to know that Matt, Jessica, and Danny are captured, restrained, or worse—he knows that the pounding on the door has long since ceased.

"Looks like you're all alone now, Sammy." The Demon says with an evil grin, raising the angel blade over Sam's head. "It's a shame, really. Asmodeus had so many plans for you." That name sends shivers down Sam's spine and flashes of memories threaten to overwhelm him once again.
The Demon's smile widens as Sam's eyes close, as he resigns himself to his fate.

Sam accepted his abilities because he thought that they were forced upon him. He spent these past two months believing that he had fought Asmodeus and his demons at every turn, that he had never given in, that the demons had been forced to destroy him in that red-walled room because he had refused to let them have him otherwise.

But now he knows better. Now he knows that he accepted the blood like a gift, drank it like a desperate junkie—like the Sam who was ruined by his brother's death and by a demon that he trusted far too easily. Ruby ruined Sam's life, ruined his relationship with his brother, nearly ruined the entire world, and Sam swore the day she died to never let another demon control him like that again, to never accept another drop of the poison that runs through the veins of black-eyed men. And in a moment of weakness, he failed. He went against everything he had worked toward for nearly a decade, just to relieve his own pain.

And now, in a cruel twist of fate, the weapon that Sam once wielded to protect himself against the righteous who wanted him dead is now in the hands of the evil. No matter what he does, Sam can't seem to get it right.

Plan C, Sam's last hope of stopping the Demon, has failed.

As Sam's world comes crashing down around him, the angel blade comes down on his head.
Chapter 37

Sam is no stranger to death.

He's died more than a few times in the past, and he's noticed over the years that a few things are pretty consistent—both in his actual deaths and his even more numerous near-death experiences. It's never particularly pleasant, regardless of the length or method of it. The people trying to kill him often go for drama over ease—the main reason that most of those near-death experiences are only near death—and therefore, his deaths are usually either sudden and unexpected or accompanied by a long, stereotypical villain monologue. Sam is fully expecting this death or near-death experience—he's hoping for the latter but, considering the circumstances, it's looking like it will be the former—to be more of the same.

Which is why the last thing Sam expects to hear as the angel blade comes down on his head is a snarky comment.

And yet, just as Sam has accepted his fate, the doors of the warehouse slam open and three vigilantes storm in, their footsteps echoing through the warehouse. Sam doesn't have to see behind himself to know that Jessica, Matt, and Danny have arrived. He can hear their shoes slamming against the concrete, can hear the beating of their hearts over the blood rushing through his own body. And as the Demon stops the angel blade mere inches from Sam's head, Jessica decides to announce the vigilantes' presence in what Sam is quickly realizing is her typical fashion.

"Sorry, dude, but this establishment follows a strict 'No Assholes Allowed' code." She says, and it's so calm, so sarcastic, so Dean that images of the past crowd the corners of Sam's vision, threaten to take over and render him useless once again.

Sam looks up at the Demon and smirks. The villain, stunned as he is by the sudden entrance of three-fourths of the Defenders, drops his arms harmlessly to his sides and takes the angel blade with them. Freed from the Demon's paralyzing control but still trapped by his own mind, Sam remains frozen, staring up at the monster who nearly killed him, memories on the verge of forcing him under.

Sam won't let that happen again.

Holding the debilitating pictures at bay, Sam jumps to his feet and spins around. He looks over his friends—Luke is still being held down by three demons, although all four of them stopped fighting upon the entrance of the rest of the Defenders—and his eyes widen when he sees the gun in Jessica's hand. It's a Colt, almost exactly the same in appearance as the one capable of killing demons. Sam told Jessica and Matt about the weapon, but he also told them that it was destroyed. He knows that this isn't the real Colt, but where did they get it?

"If you want to kill me, you'll have to go through your friend first." The Demon threatens, his voice coming from directly behind Sam. Without even thinking about it, Sam swallows hard and teleports himself to his friends. Not even bothering to mask his surprise at his sudden ability to teleport—that, along with so many other things, is a problem for another time—Sam turns, taking the gun from Jessica.

"Sorry, man, but I'm done playing your game," Sam says, pointing the gun at the Demon's head. The Demon hesitates, obviously convinced that the weapon in Sam's hand is truly the legendary Colt—one of the benefits of having the gun in his and his brother's possession for so long, Sam figures, is that most of the supernatural world still doesn't know exactly what it looks like.
"I wonder, if we were to shoot you with that gun, would you glow as you died?" The Demon queries, taking a cautious step back as he stalls for time. Sam takes a few steps forward, keeping the gun trained on the black-eyed man as Jessica, Matt, and Danny free Luke from the three demons holding him down. Once the rest of the demons in the room have been taken care of, the four Defenders walk over to Sam and stand at his side, staring the Demon down with crossed arms and menacing glares all around. "Just a question." The Demon says innocently, raising his hands in mock surrender.

"You know what? I don't think I'd glow." Sam replies, nodding to the Defenders. Jessica clenches her fists, Matt raises his billy club, Danny's right fist starts to glow, and Luke just grins, nodding. Sam turns back to the Demon, cocking the gun and smirking. "I don't think you will, either."

Before the Demon has time to process Sam's words, Sam has pulled the trigger, sending a bullet into the black-eyed man's thigh. The Demon stares in disbelief as he falls to his knees, glaring up at Sam.

"A fake." He says, shaking his head. "I should have known." He looks down at his legs, apparently attempting to stand up, and Sam sees it in his eyes the second he figures out that while this gun wasn't the Colt, it certainly wasn't normal. For his part, Sam just grins, finally realizing exactly what the Defenders did.

"This gun may not be able to kill you, but the bullet in your leg has a devil's trap carved into it," Sam says. The Defenders must have found the specially-made bullets that Claire Novak gave him in his duffel bag. "You aren't going anywhere."

"So, now what?" Danny asks as Sam shoves the gun into his jeans.

"Luke, Jessica, and I will make sure the rest of the henchmen are taken care of," Matt says. As soon as he vocalizes this, Luke and Jessica peel off, heading for the door to check on the demons outside. "You should keep an eye on the Demon," Danny nods, fist glowing a bright orange as Matt follows Jessica and Luke outside. Danny catches Sam's eye and sends him a confident smile and a thumbs up as Sam jogs past him, heading straight for his friends.

"About time you showed up," Claire says as soon as Sam has pulled the duct tape off of her mouth. Sam cuts Claire free with his pocket knife and the two work together to free Jody and Alex from their bindings. The three women pull Sam into a tight group hug and he smiles, eyes glowing brightly from the influence of an emotion Sam hasn't felt this strongly in a long time—relief.

"You really had us worried there, Sam." Alex comments, nodding to the angel blade that Danny is currently trying to pull out of the Demon's stiff hand.

"Me, too," Sam replies, walking over to Danny and his captive demon and waiting for Jody, Claire, and Alex to join him before he continues. "We obviously can't kill him, but a normal prison won't hold him." Matt, Luke, and Jessica reenter the building and head over to the group, and Matt nods for Sam to continue. "The Demon has very similar abilities to me, which means that he can teleport. No prison on Earth could effectively hold him."

"You don't need to worry about that." A new voice says, and the heroes and victims turn to see a woman in a crisp suit standing in the doorway. She enters the room with a nod over her shoulder and a team of people dressed in black tactical suits follows, guns raised and pointed not at the vigilantes but at the demon on his knees between them.

"Who are you?" Danny asks guardedly, instinctively brandishing the angel blade still in his grasp.
"Agent Maria Hill of SHIELD." The woman says, nodding to the Demon. "We're here to take Norman Whitmore to a secure prison capable of holding someone with his capabilities." Sam snorts quietly at this and beside him, he sees the corner of Claire's mouth turn up.

"You knew that this was Norman Whitmore?" Luke asks, sounding surprised and more than a little irritated as he rubs his arm. One of the demons holding him probably managed to pull a muscle through his impenetrable skin.

"You knew that this was his base?" Sam adds suspiciously, his yellow eyes flashing as anger begins to build in his stomach.

"Yes and yes." Agent Hill says with a stiff nod. "SHIELD was planning to enter the warehouse after the kidnapping of Jody Mills, Claire Novak, and Alex Jones, but you five beat us to the punch." Hill nods to the Defenders and Sam.

"It's a good thing you did, too." A male voice adds, and one of the tac team members steps forward. "We wouldn't have been able to stop him. We didn't know as much about his abilities as we thought we did."

"Thank you, Agent Barton." Agent Hill says, obviously annoyed with the man. His name sounds vaguely familiar, but Sam isn't entirely sure why—it's not like he has any reason to know the name of a random SHIELD agent. "If you'll excuse us, we'll be taking Mr. Whitmore."

"You never answered us," Sam replies testily, stepping directly between the SHIELD team and the paralyzed demon, who looks just as confused as everyone else about the agents' sudden arrival.

"If you must know, Darkside, a member of SHIELD has been carefully tracking the Demon's progress for months." Agent Hill explains slowly. "He claims to have received a tip about the Demon's real name from a source on an online discussion board that he refuses to name in order to protect their identity." Sam's eyes widen at this and he exchanges a look with Jessica, who appears to have made the same connection. A man on an online discussion board who was given the Demon's name by someone else. A man who also knows the location of this warehouse.

Andrew Smith is a SHIELD agent.

"Your secure prison, it can hold him?" Sam asks, gesturing to the Demon. "Can keep him from breaking out or teleporting away?"

"The walls are lined with vibranium shipped straight from Wakanda." Agent Kill says. "And while I don't have personal experience regarding the matter, I believe that Whitmore would find it very hard to teleport out of a prison located in the middle of the ocean." Sam nods, satisfied by the details Hill provided—demons have far fewer restrictions on their teleportation than Sam does, but even they have their limits. No low-level demon can teleport to dry land from the middle of the ocean, and especially not from a demon-proofed cell. It's a pretty good way to keep the Demon from ever terrorizing New York again.

Still, Sam pauses. The Demon is a supervillain who has tried to kill Sam and his friends several times, who has a plan that Sam still doesn't know the full scope of. But Norman Whitmore isn't. Norman Whitmore is an ordinary man who was possessed by an evil creature, an ordinary man who, should the Demon be imprisoned, would be sentenced to eternity in Hell for a crime he didn't commit.

The Demon deserves that punishment. Norman Whitmore doesn't.
Sam turns away from the SHIELD agents and steps toward the Demon, examining him closely. The Demon meets Sam's eyes and proceeds to glare daggers at him, which Sam chooses to ignore entirely. Once Sam finds what he's looking for—a rusty stain that was almost scrubbed out of the Demon's shirt, but not quite—he straightens, nodding to Hill.

"Take him," Sam says, earning surprised looks from the Defenders and his friends. "If you want to really make sure that he doesn't escape, keep that bullet in his leg until you get to your prison. It's not going to kill him, but he won't be able to move with it in his body. At all." Sam grabs the Demon's arm as he speaks, pulling the monster roughly to his feet. "And once you're there, take the bullet out and take a look at it," Sam instructs. Agent Hill nods to one of her men and he pulls out a notepad, scribbling notes as Sam continues. "There's a symbol etched into the tip of the bullet, that's what's keeping Whitmore under control. If you replicate it over the door of his cell, it will keep him in."

The black-eyed man scowls at Sam as he's handed off to a couple of the SHIELD agents. Sam steps back, rejoining his friends and watching as the tac team disappears as quickly as they came. Only Agent Barton and Agent Hill hang back, both studying the team of misfit heroes with the same degree of intensity.

"You're doing good work here." Agent Hill says after a minute, offering a small, firm, but genuine smile. "If you ever end up in prison, give us a call." She turns on her heel and walks out the door and Agent Barton follows, leaving the Defenders, Sam, and the three women alone in the warehouse.

"She never gave us a number, though," Danny says, confused. The Defenders, Alex, and Claire start to discuss the SHIELD agents' unexpected appearance but Sam ignores them, channeling his relief and confusion and underlying fear into his senses and pushing them out into the world with one focus in mind.

"You know what, Tony?" Sam hears the male agent—Barton—say, his voice faint but his words clear. "I think Darkside would make a pretty good addition to the team." Agent Barton says something else but his words are masked by the sound of a helicopter starting up. Sam listens until that, too, fades away and the SHIELD agents leave Hell's Kitchen behind, taking the Demon with them. Once he's confident that SHIELD's presence has been lifted, Sam turns back to his friends, pulling his mask down and accepting another hug from Jody, who smiles.

"Why did you give the Demon to them, Sam?" Alex asks curiously, drawing the attention of everyone to Sam. "What about Whitmore?"

"What do you mean?" Luke asks, obviously confused.

"Whitmore isn't the one responsible for this," Jessica explains to Luke and Danny. "The Demon is an actual demon who possessed Whitmore to use him."

"So Norman Whitmore is innocent?" Danny asks, frowning.

"Whitmore is dead," Sam explains, shaking his head. "The body that the Demon is using is vacant. There's a bullet wound in his chest that SHIELD is going to very confused about, but it does mean that Norman Whitmore won't have to pay for the Demon's crimes." Satisfied, everyone returns to their own conversations. Sam steps away from the group to gather his thoughts and Jody follows, offering a sympathetic smile.

"I heard what the Demon said to you, Sam." She says softly. The majority of the group chatters on obliviously, but Sam notices that Matt perks up slightly. "It doesn't matter if you gave in. You were
in pain, confused, probably even drugged. You weren't in control of your own actions." Sam shakes
his head and Jody frowns. "Even if you were, it wasn't your fault. You were just trying to survive."
It's ironic, that Sam keeps trying to survive and keeps dying, but it also hits him hard because Jody
is right. All Sam ever does is try to survive. Every action, every decision, every mistake has been
Sam just trying to survive. He wants to run, hide, beat a wall until his knuckles split, punish
himself for giving in to Asmodeus, to the poison that runs through his veins, but he can't because
Jody is right.

Sam was just trying to survive.

Sam smiles weakly at Jody, hugging her once more and turning to survey his friends. Danny and
Alex are talking excitedly about some TV show Sam has never heard of, and Luke is listening to
them with a wide smile on his face. Claire and Jessica are also chatting animatedly, although their
discussion centers around street thugs and demons. Matt is following their discussion closely,
occasionally adding information of his own, but he's also clearly keeping an ear on Sam and Jody.
When he senses Sam's eyes on him, Matt turns, sending Sam a confident smile and holding out the
angel blade—Danny must have handed it over while Sam was handing off the Demon. Sam and
Jody rejoin the group, and Jody walks over to Claire and Jessica while Sam stops beside Matt,
taking the angel blade and shoving it back into his jacket.

"She's right, you know," Matt comments under his breath, his voice barely a whisper. Both Matt
and Sam can hear the quiet undertones of the world, the screech of tires across town, the birds
chirping on rooftops two blocks away, the steady heartbeats of the friends standing before them.
They understand how the world works more than anyone else because they can hear it all. They
know that the world is broken, filled with sirens and crying and pain, but they also know that it's
beautiful, filled with laughter and exclamations of joy and music. No one understands the
paradoxical nature of life more than Matt Murdock. And no one else can have a conversation with
Sam in a room with six other people without anyone else hearing a thing.

Sam allows the yellow to fade from his vision as he smiles, turning to Matt and pulling the other
vigilante into a tight hug.

"I know," Sam says, and it's true. He knows that what Asmodeus did to him wasn't his fault, that
Lebanon wasn't his fault, that Gadreel and Lucifer and Ruby and Azazel weren't his fault, either.

Sam was just trying to survive. And for the first time, with the people standing around him now by
his side, he just might be able to do more than survive.

For the first time, Sam just might be able to live.
Chapter 38

Three days after the end of the Demon's reign of terror, Sam, his friends, and the Defenders gather in Matt's apartment to formally celebrate their victory. Claire Temple—after keeping Sam at the clinic for three days to assess the damage done to his shoulder during his one-on-one fight with the Demon—is present as well, as are Karen and Foggy, the latter of whom brought a jug of beer from Josie's that no one other than Karen, Matt, Jessica, and Foggy himself are brave enough to try—Claire Novak was going to take a sip until a firm glare from Jody convinced her otherwise.

In the three days since the Demon's defeat by Sam and the Defenders and formal arrest by SHIELD, the island of Manhattan has had a drop in crime so significant that it's made the front page all over the country. Despite the fact that Sam doubts SHIELD would have spilled the beans and everyone else involved swears up and down that they weren't caught on camera or seen by any civilians, Darkside and the Defenders have been closely tied to the stories of the Demon's fall from power. The five are being referred to by the media as a new wave of superheroes, called the Defenders of the Streets or, as Sam is quickly discovering is the favorite term on Twitter, the People's Avengers—a moniker that Danny finds hilarious and Jessica absolutely hates.

All in all, the past three days have been a whirlwind, and despite the lack of crime Sam is still beyond grateful to walk into Matt's apartment and find his friends chatting together, laughing and happy and safe.

"Hey, Sam, you've got mail." Claire Novak calls from the couch as soon as Sam walks through the door, waving him over. She's got his laptop balanced on her lap with an article from the Daily Bugle pulled up on the screen. It's a think piece by the editor of the paper, a man named J. Jonah Jameson, about how vigilantes like Darkside and the Defenders are a menace to society and should all be thrown in prison. Most of the comments appear to strongly disagree with Jameson, but Sam wouldn't put much weight into the editor's opinion even if the general public agreed with him; Jameson has made it very clear that he thinks of the local vigilante of his hometown of Queens, Spider-Man, as the worst vigilante of all, and Sam is pretty sure—despite never having met the hero in red and blue spandex—that Jameson's opinion could not possibly be more wrong.

"Actually, you did get some real mail," Alex says from the other end of the couch. "You got an email a few minutes ago. Claire wanted to open it but I told her not to." Sam offers Alex a grateful smile then swipes the computer from Claire, opening his email and discovering that he did, in fact, get a new message—from ats5297@gmail.com, the man Sam now knows is actually a SHIELD agent.

Good job, Darkside. -AS

There's an attachment in the email, a pdf of a coupon for half-off an extra large pizza at a place in the center of Manhattan—the address, Sam realizes when he copies it into Google Maps, is directly across the street from the bank where Sam was shot. Sam smiles, shaking his head and closing both the map and the email. He opens a new tab and heads to the discussion board for his hacking class, only to discover that the page no longer exists. Instead, there's a single line of text in what appears to be Russian that, when Sam puts it into Google Translate, offers another message.

Этот класс больше не требуется.
Sam frowns, closing the tab and shutting the lid of his laptop.

"Sam," Jody says and Sam sets the computer down on the coffee table, looking up to see the sheriff holding out a small box wrapped in wrapping paper with a small yellow bow on top.

"What is this?" Sam asks, feeling just as confused as everyone else in the room looks. They all watch curiously as Sam takes the present, opening it to reveal a new iPhone.

"I heard that your old phone was broken," Jody says, and Sam sends a glare in Matt's direction. The blind vigilante just smirks, shaking his head and crossing his arms. "Happy birthday, Sam." Jody continues, and Sam's eyes widen as he turns the new phone on and checks the date. Sure enough, it's May 2nd, 2018. Sam's 35th birthday.

"Wait, it's your birthday?" Jessica asks, surprised.

"Apparently," Sam replies, shaking his head and smiling up at Jody. "Thank you, Jody. It means a lot." Sam stands and Jody immediately pulls him into a hug, nodding after they part.

"You better use that thing to keep in touch, you understand me?" She says, her tone completely serious. Sam nods, slipping the phone into his pocket.

"Well, now we have even more to celebrate!" Foggy says excitedly, holding up the jug of what he claims is beer. Claire Temple shakes her head, walking into Matt's kitchen and returning with an armful of water bottles that she then distributes to the majority of the room that isn't willing to drink the 'beer'. After everyone has a drink, Claire raises her water bottle, smiling at Sam.

"To a new year." She says. Sam lifts his bottle in reply and the rest of the room is quick to join in.

"To new beginnings." Karen and Foggy chorus together, erupting into a fit of giggling that leaves them red-faced—apparently, they had some of the 'beer' before Sam arrived.

"To a new day," Jessica says simply, and Sam notes that she's holding a bottle of beer that doesn't match any of the ones sitting on Matt's counter.

"To a new hero." Jody continues. Luke, Danny, Alex, and Claire Novak hold up their water bottles one after the other in silent toasts and Sam turns to Matt, who grins.

"To new allies," Matt says as he unscrews the lid of his water bottle. Everyone turns to Sam, waiting for him to say his bit. For his part, Sam hesitates, looking around the room. He looks at Jody, Claire Novak, and Alex, the friends he made in a life that he no longer lives but who stuck by his side anyway. He looks at Matt, Karen, Claire Temple, and Foggy, who thought that he was someone to fear but who trusted him regardless. He looks at Jessica, Luke, and Danny, who were strangers four days ago but who came to Sam's aid when he needed it most.

He looks at the people who surround him now, who have supported him through the best and worst two and a half months of his life, and he smiles.

"To new friends," Sam says, taking a swig of his water. Everyone else follows shortly and laughter fills the room as Foggy chokes on his 'beer', nearly dropping his cup as he tries to catch his breath.

These people who surround Sam now, who laugh and cheer and who support him every step of the way, they're more than just Sam's friends. They're something that he can't describe with words, not in a way that could ever make them understand. They're too important for words.
They're Sam's second chance.

And he knows, standing here now, that he's not going to waste it.

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The next day, Sam wakes up to a text from Matt telling him to meet the blind man at Sam's usual coffee shop. Sam has no idea how Matt even knows about the shop—they've never been there together, and Sam originally thought that Matt never followed him there—but he goes anyway, teleporting himself to the alley beside the shop. When he walks inside, Sam finds Matt standing at the counter and chatting animatedly with Katy, who looks eager to speak with the blind lawyer—Sam isn't entirely surprised, considering that Katy is a pre-law major at NYU.

"Hey," Sam says somewhat awkwardly as he approaches the counter. Katy smiles, grabbing a bag from the top of the display case and holding it out to Sam.

"Here you are, your usual." She says happily, and Sam takes the bag with one hand as he digs through his pockets with the other, looking for any spare change that may have magically found its way into Sam's dirty jeans. "Don't bother, your friend already paid," Katy says, and Sam looks up to see Matt grinning, a drink tray with two coffees in it in one hand and his cane in the other. The blind man is also, curiously, wearing a backpack, something that Sam has never seen before.

"Let's sit, shall we?" Matt suggests, walking over to Sam's usual table as he speaks—and confirming Sam's suspicions that the man has indeed followed him here at least a couple of times.

"You didn't have to do this," Sam says as he takes a seat across from Matt, opening the paper bag to reveal four fresh croissants. Matt pushes one of the coffees across the table to Sam and takes a sip from the other, accepting one croissant when Sam offers but refusing a second.

"I didn't know that yesterday was your birthday, or I would have done all of this then," Matt explains, folding his cane up and setting it down on the chair beside him before pulling off his backpack. Sam takes a sip of his coffee—milk and two sugars—and watches as Matt unzips the bag and pulls out a box that has been carefully wrapped in the comics section of a newspaper.

Sam's heart skips a beat at the familiarity of the routine and it takes a minute for him to remember that this can't possibly be a gift from Dean because Dean is in prison and Dean thinks that Sam is dead.

It's a sobering thought, and the smile quickly falls off of Sam's face as he realizes that while he was celebrating yesterday with his friends in Matt's apartment, his brother must have been suffering greatly.

Sam should have Jody visit Dean at the prison and tell him the truth.

"Unwrap it." Matt urges, apparently aware of Sam's rapidly spiraling thoughts.

"You didn't need to get me anything." Sam protests but he takes the box anyway, carefully pulling the paper off and opening the cardboard box beneath.

Inside is a prosthetic leg, one that is obviously more expensive than anything Sam could ever have dreamed of affording even before Lebanon. It's shinier, cleaner, and much more humanoid than Sam's current leg, and Sam finds himself gaping at it in complete and utter disbelief.

"I ordered it about a month ago and took it to Melvin as soon as it came in," Matt explains. "He coated it in the same lightweight plastic that your jacket is made out of and promised me that the entire thing is bulletproof." Sam nods, eyes wide as he stares at the expensive piece of tech. He
knows, of course, that this is far from the best prosthetic on the market—it's still relatively basic as far as prosthetic limbs go, even with Melvin's upgrades—but it's still far better than anything Sam could have imagined.

"Thank you," Sam says, wishing he could find the words to convey how truly grateful he is for everything that Matt has done for him.

"Why don't you try it out?" Matt suggests with a grin. Sam glances at the counter and—once he sees that Katy has disappeared into the kitchen—nods, rolling up the leg of his jeans and swapping his old, rusted, dented prosthetic for the shiny new one. Sam has just finished putting his shoe back on when he hears a loud scream from outside the shop and jumps to his feet automatically, the new prosthetic slotting into place naturally. Matt looks up and grins, nodding to the pocket of Sam's jacket where they both know Sam's black mask is stowed. "Go save the day, Darkside," Matt says encouragingly and Sam nods, pulling the mask out and tying it around his neck.

"Thank you," Sam says again, and Matt waves off the gratitude.

"It's the least I can do." He replies. "Now go get 'em." With one last grateful smile at the blind lawyer, Sam runs out of the coffee shop, pulling the mask over his mouth as his eyes flash yellow. It isn't hard to locate the source of the scream: a few blocks over, a small glowing figure is quickly being surrounded by three much larger ones. Sam breaks into a run, a smile spreading across his face once again.

Far above the city, a figure perches on a rooftop, watching over the masked man as he runs from the coffee shop and turns, heading into the heart of Manhattan. As Darkside ducks into an alley, the man straightens, firing up his suit and preparing to take to the sky.

"As much as I hate to admit it, Barton, you were right." The man says with a smirk, watching as the yellow-eyed vigilante in the alley below suddenly disappears, there one second and gone the next. "Darkside is pretty talented." An angry yell echoes from a few blocks down the street and the man smirks, taking to the skies. For now, his work here is done.

As he passes over the next block, the hero spots a man with yellow eyes fighting several armed individuals in ski masks and his smile widens. Pausing for a moment, Iron Man makes one final comment before heading back to his tower.

"I definitely think we should keep an eye on this one."

END OF BOOK ONE

Chapter End Notes

Here we are, at the end of Darkside's first story.

Thank you to everyone who made it this far, and thank you for all of the kudos and the fantastic comments—know that I read every single one, even if I can't reply.

Sam Winchester and Darkside will return, but not for a little while. I'm going to have a lot of schoolwork in the coming months and the second book in the Second Chances series, Judgement Day, is nowhere near finished and I probably won't have time to write.
The first chapter of Judgement Day will be posted on Saturday, June 16, so be sure to subscribe to the Second Chances series page to be notified when it comes out.

For the next couple of months, I'll be posting chapters of a pre-written story called "Running Softly" twice a week on Tuesdays and Saturdays. The chapters are extremely short and it's written in a slightly different style to this book but I hope that anyone who chooses to read it will enjoy it anyway. It's a Criminal Minds crossover but no knowledge of the Criminal Minds series is required to read it—I pretty much just stole a few names, and the story is mostly focused around Sam and Dean. The first chapter of Running Softly is already up so you can find it on my page if you're interested.

Thanks again for taking the time to read about Sam Winchester's Darkside adventures!

Emily

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!