In a Cursed Hour

by bratfarrar, deadlybride

Summary

In 1958, Abaddon doesn't commence soul-mining operations. She doesn't possess Josie, and doesn't learn the secrets Josie knows, and the Men of Letters aren't destroyed. In 1983, a demon kills Mary Winchester, and her husband--Man of Letters John Winchester--sets out to get his revenge. His sons are raised as legacies.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Prologue: All Is Not Lost

Chapter Summary

In October 1958, Henry Winchester and Josie Sands investigate a haunting in Beardstown, Illinois, and everything goes smoothly. A few weeks later, they prepare for their initiation.


When Henry came up the stairs into the chapterhouse, Josie was perched neatly in the window seat, head bent under the Aquarian star in the glass. She looked pretty as a picture, cocktail gown spread out over the bench, and as soon as she heard his step she looked up, and smiled.

“Josie,” he said, removing his hat, and she stood to meet him, her smile widening a little. “No one told me this initiation was a formal affair.”

She ducked her head a fraction and shrugged, her bare shoulders pale in the hallway’s harsh light. “I’m just—real happy it’s finally happening.” She reached out to adjust his tie, solicitous as a sister, and brushed her finger over his pin. “The hard part’s over, right?” she said, eyes fixed on it. “We made it.”

Henry caught her hand, and when her eyes flew up to his, he squeezed it gently. “We made it, Josie,” he said, and she was flushed a little but she nodded, anyway, eyes bright.

The door into the sanctum swung open, then, and Josie stepped back from him as they both turned to
find Ted standing there in his officiant’s robes. “Ms. Sands?” he said, formally, like they hadn’t worked side by side for almost a year, taking their last steps toward initiation under his guidance.

Henry swallowed, his earlier nerves hitting him strongly in the stomach. Josie firmed her mouth, but nodded at Ted and followed him into the chamber—Henry smiled encouragingly at her when she glanced back, and then the door closed, and he wouldn’t get to know what happened behind it for nearly an hour.

He sat, and waited. Low sounds came from behind the door, and for a few seconds there was a sharp smell of sage smoke, and then a burst of sound as the chanting grew quite loud. His stomach rolled, slowly, and he sat very straight against the window with his hands on his knees. He recited the Sura Al-Falaq to himself, and the names of the thirty-three gods of the Vedic tradition, and then he visualized the exact working of the spell to incapacitate a cockatrice, and then before he knew it the door swung open again, and he found himself on his feet as Ted said, “Mr. Winchester?” He didn’t know where Josie had gone, and his nerves were no better, but he swallowed, and nodded, and then he walked through the door to finally earn the right to his father’s legacy.

The cut on Henry’s right thumb kept catching as he tried to locate his house key and get it correctly slotted into the lock; an onlooker might have suspected excessive imbibing, but he’d had only a glass of celebratory wine after the ceremony—it was just a combination of elation, leftover nerves, and the unfamiliar bite of pain whenever he shifted weight. Frustration had begun to overtake his giddiness by the time he managed to drop the bunch of keys yet again, and it made a clatter that seemed to ricochet along their silent street.

Just as he’d crouched awkwardly down to retrieve the keys—he’d never realized before just how active the big toe was in helping one stay balanced—the front stoop light came on and the deadbolt disengaged. Before he had the chance to straighten again, the door opened to reveal Millie, wearing nightgown, curlers, and the crease between her eyes that meant she was approaching the end of her patience.

“What on earth are you doing, Henry? I’m surprised half the neighborhood hasn’t woken from all your commotion.”

Just like that, he was all joy again—he’d always found it delightful how Millie managed time and again to say exactly what he’d been thinking himself. He must have been grinning at her like the besotted fool he was, because her expression softened.

“Did your meeting go well, then?”

“The meeting went wonderfully,” he said, and surged up and into the sort of kiss he’d been too distracted to give her recently. He cupped her dear startled face in his hands and she let out a surprised little sound, but relaxed into him, and he found himself grinning against her mouth.

“Everything is perfect,” he told her a fair bit later, when they were comfortably ensconced in bed together—well, comfortable aside from his still-aching thumb and the way Millie’s curlers were digging into his collarbone. She made a vague sound of assent and burrowed her face a little more into his chest, which didn’t help with the curlers. “They’re very happy with what I’ve been doing at work—there was even talk of a promotion, though we might need to move. Would you mind too much if we did?”

“No, of course not,” she murmured, muffled slightly by his chest. “Whatever we need to do for your job. I’m sure it’ll all be fine.”
“It’ll be better than fine,” Henry said, tucking her closer. He looked up at the dim ceiling and pictured a future. He was now, truly, a Man of Letters, like his father before him. He pictured their son, on some distant day, tall and proud with the Aquarian star pinned over his heart, because he'd earned his heritage. Just as Henry now had. "It'll be wonderful. I'm sure of it."
Sam Winchester rejected the life of a Man of Letters. He's living and working in Boston when his brother unexpectedly shows up and tells him that their father is missing.

Boston, Massachusetts: October 30, 2005

“Jenn?” Sam says, finishing his tie in the mirror. He steps back, grinning at the effect of the way-too-big suit jacket. “Are you ready? We’re gonna be late if we don’t hurry, baby.”

Jenn pops her head into the bedroom, scowling at him. “Okay, first of all, we were late fifteen minutes ago,” she says, through a mouthful of bobby pins. “Second, if you call me baby again when you’re forcing me to go to this dumb day-before-Halloween party, I will kick you. I don’t care if you’re a mountain, or if I break a toe. You will be kicked.”

Sam laughs and follows her into their tiny bathroom, stepping over the spilled wreck of the laundry basket. She’s craned around, one eye on the mirror as she tries to tame the long red waterfall of her hair into a what she’s calling a ‘nineties bun.’

“Agent Scully, I’m sure that’s no way to speak to your partner,” he says, deepening his voice a little. She rolls her eyes and he smiles, bending down to press a kiss against the fine pale skin on her temple.

She tucks in the last messy strand of red hair and runs slim fingers through her bangs. “Should’ve
made you be Scully,” she says, with a huff, but she’s smiling back at him in the mirror.

He wraps his hands around her tiny waist, pulls her back so that he can rest his chin on her head—she’s wearing those oh-so-sensible flats, so he has to bend a little to do it, but it’s not like he minds. She squirms against him, comfortably, and then her gaze goes a little critical, tracking over both of their reflections. “You think we look good?”

He smiles and presses another kiss to the top of her head, speaks into the soft sweet-smelling mass of her hair. “You always look good,” he says, and picks up his head again with a grin. “Baby.”

He gets a quick backwards kick to the shin, as promised, but she’s grinning, too, so he figures it was worth it.

Brandi’s apartment is crammed full with college kids—some of them Sam knows from the cafe, but most of them are classmates of hers and Jenn’s at BU that he really only sees at these things. Brandi’s got the music turned up loud and he’s surrounded by costumed English majors and someone’s definitely smoking pot, by the smell, and he loses Jenn in about five minutes. That’s pretty typical—he tells her it’s like trying to keep track of a toddler in a crowd. She usually climbs him in retaliation.

He’s grabbing two cups of what looks like truly vile punch when a slight weight rams into him from behind and there’s a shout of, “Samwise! You made it!”

He barely saves the cups and turns around to find Brandi grinning up at him, barely dressed in a slutty devil costume with sparkly red horns, one arm slung around the waist of a pretty girl in a short toga-style white dress with knocked-askew angel wings. “Hey,” he shouts back, and accepts the group hug he’s smushed into. “I don’t think we’ve met?” he says to the angel-girl, leaning down a little so he can be heard.

Brandi nods enthusiastically—already had a few cups of whatever’s in the punch bowl, Sam’s guessing—and squeezes the girl closer. “This is Miranda, she’s pre-Med at Hahvahd,” she says, with an exaggerated accent, and then knocks a sloppy kiss against the girl’s flushed, smiling face. “She’s super hot and divine in the sack and you can’t have her, she’s mine.”

“Brandi!” Miranda squeals, knocking her hip into Brandi’s in protest, but she doesn’t actually look upset.

Brandi grins at her wolfishly and Sam rolls his eyes. “I feel like I should apologize on her behalf,” he says to Miranda, and flicks one of Brandi’s red horns. “You’re feral, we can’t take you anywhere. I’m amazed that Benson hasn’t fired you.”

“Benson loves me,” she shoots back, and he grins, shaking his head. It’s a familiar argument.

A little hand slides around his waist and he looks down to find Jenn leaning into his side, and he offers her one of his punch cups with a kiss. “Benson thinks it’s trendy to have a pretty lesbian serving coffee to the Cantabridgians,” Jenn says, though her smile at Miranda is polite.

Brandi leans in to give Jenn a kiss on the cheek in greeting—it leaves a smear of dark red lipstick, which she thumbs familiarly away. “What can I say,” she says, grinning. “I was in drama in high school, I’m fine with playing my role. Better than dimpling up at the cougars for tips, right, Sam?”

“Hey,” he says, mildly. “I give away the dimples for free.”

“Don’t I know it,” Jenn says, reaching up to tug at his hair, and then one of their fellow baristas from
the cafe crashes into the group and a fun, fast song comes on and Jenn drags him out into the crowd to dance, and time passes pretty quickly after that.

It’s much later, nearly midnight, when they’re sprawled around the wreck of the coffee table. Most of the other kids are gone, but the music’s still playing low—the Monster Mash, yet again—and Brandi’s covered all the lamps with scarves so the room’s full of murky red light. Sam’s feeling pretty mellow, half a j and four or five cups of toxic punch under his belt, Jenn’s bare pretty feet in his lap. Miranda’s passed out in the bedroom and Brandi’s across from him slung over her ratty third-hand armchair, kicking her long legs in the air while she pours the last of her bottle of wine into a coffee mug.

“Here’s to Sammy,” Brandi says, toasting him with the mug. “The very best barista in Cambridge, and the best cocktail-slinger those Harvard snobs could hope for, and—and probably the best man-meat this side of the Charles River, though of course I will let you be the judge of that, Jenn-baby.”

“Don’t call me Sammy,” Sam says, and tips his head back against the back of the couch. Jenn’s giggling, hands over her face. He wiggles one of her little feet, and she manages to get out, “Man-meat,” half-choked with laughter. He tips a glare at Brandi, who shrugs, unrepentant.

“Seriously, though—seriously, Sam,” Jenn says, hauling herself a little more upright by the sleeve of his crappy Goodwill Mulder jacket. She fixes him with one of her earnest looks, “You’re just—you’re so good, you know? You’re working two jobs and you’re amazing, I’m so proud and grateful for you, sweetheart, but—you’re so smart, honey. Isn’t he smart, B?”

Brandi props her head on one hand, grinning at Sam’s discomfort. “He is very smart, J.”

“I know!” Jenn struggles up a little more, her hair half-undone and darkened almost to black in the dim light. Sam tucks a wing of it behind her ear, smiling at how heartfelt her expression is, even if he’s heard this a dozen times before. “Your SAT score was better than mine. You could get in, easy—to any of the schools in this town, even with those Harvard assholes. You could get into anywhere you wanted to go.”

He sighs, and picks up her hand from his jacket, kissing the palm of it. “She’s right, you know,” Brandi says. He glances over—she tips her mug at him in another little toast, red mouth curled up on one side. “You can be anything you want to be, Sam Winchester.”

“You’re an instigator,” he says to Brandi, and then scoops Jenn into his lap. He tips her chin up with a finger. “I promise, baby, I’m exactly where I want to be. I don’t want to be stuck in a library, always studying instead of meeting people, seeing the world. That’s how I got to meet you, remember?”

“Yeah,” she says, soft, but she’s not going to let it go—only brought it up so baldly because she’s tipsy, and tired, and probably not going to make it to her nine a.m. class tomorrow. He kisses her, and she just blinks sleepily, fingers toying with his fake FBI badge that says Fox Mulder.

“Come on, Scully,” he says, standing up with her still in his arms, her weight curled in against his chest. “Time to get home.”

It’s a windy, wet night, the trees bare of the last of their leaves and rattling as October comes to its chilly end. That’s not what woke Sam, though, and he blinks away his dream’s bright afterimages of fire, scrubs a hand over his eyes, Jenn breathing slow and low and pressed up against his back. The
wind soughs past their windows, and the trees across the street creak with it, but it’s near-silent otherwise. It’s just past three in the morning, by the bedside clock. He’s supposed to be up in two hours to get to work at the cafe, and he sighs, eyes slipping closed again—but then there’s another rattle, not from the wind or the trees or the old building but from inside the apartment, and his eyes fly wide, heart suddenly pounding in his chest.

He rolls out of bed and is at the bedroom door immediately, on near-silent feet. There’s a creak, and that’s—the hinges on the front door, which Jenn keeps meaning to oil and then forgetting, and then the door squeaks back shut and that means—there’s someone in their living room. Sam takes a deep breath, trying to stay quiet, and peeks around the doorframe.

There’s hardly any light coming through the windows. Just enough to see some black shape, some fucking guy, hovering in the space between the kitchenette and the couch, and he starts to turn toward the bedroom and Sam bunches himself and then explodes forward through the open door, catching the guy around the middle and shoving him into the wall next to the fridge. The impact jars the breath out of Sam but the guy eels out of his grip, rolling into the counter and sending the clean silverware in the drainer rattling back into the sink. Sam grabs at his arm but the guy slips him, wool coat sliding under his fingers as he staggers back, back toward the bedroom door, toward Jenn, and Sam flat out tackles him, hitting him in the chest with his shoulder and bearing them both down to the floor, and the guy’s breathing hard, shoving against Sam’s bigger body, and Sam sits up on his knees and tries to grab the guy’s hands, to bear him down and get him still and call for the police, and then the guy twists his hips hard and Sam’s tossed off, onto his side somehow, and the guy scrambles away back toward the kitchen, skidding backwards across the floor, and Sam shoves himself to his feet and reaches, ready to haul the prick back and knock him out if he has to, when silvery light spills into the room as the moon comes out from behind the clouds and—what, what the fuck—

“Sam, Sammy, it’s me, it’s me,” Dean says, panting hard, pressed up tight against the oven door. Sam freezes in place, staring. “You—you haven’t shaved,” he says.

Dean blinks at him, chest heaving, and Sam shakes his head, says, “God, Dean, sorry—here,” and grabs Dean’s hands, pulls him up to his feet, fast enough that Dean staggers a little and Sam has to set a hand on his shoulder to steady him. He flicks on the kitchen light and just—stares, for a second. It’s been—what, four years, a little more, and somehow Dean’s shorter than him now. Dad’s old navy peacoat hangs off his shoulders, a little too big on him, and his hair’s a little longer than it used to be, the usually neatly parted sweep of it disheveled from their fight. He’s skinnier than Sam remembers, and he hasn’t shaved in a week by the look of it, and he’s milk-pale with his freckles standing out harshly in the bright kitchen light, and he’s staring at Sam, eyes wide, like—Sam drags him into a hug, wraps his arms tight around Dean’s shoulders and squeezes. It’s been so long. Dean hitches in a surprised breath, but hugs him right back—clings hard, his face buried in against Sam’s shoulder. Sam puts a hand over the back of his head, on the soft muss of his hair, and Dean shudders, his hands clawing into Sam’s t-shirt, tight.

“Dean,” Sam says, and goes to pull back but Dean doesn’t let go. “Hey, Dean, what’s—”

“No!” He grabs Dean’s arm and pulls him back to Sam’s side, shaking his head at Jenn. “No, baby. Sorry, I just didn’t realize—this is my brother. This is Dean.”
Her eyes pop wide, and Sam turns back to Dean, whose expression is shuttered, but he’s looking straight back at Sam. “Jennifer’s my girlfriend, Dean, we—this is our apartment.”

“Sorry,” Dean says, after a second. “I have to talk to you, Sammy.” He flicks a glance at Jenn, and then looks down at the floor, flushing a little.

Sam meets Jenn’s confused look with a shrug. “I—of course, man,” he says, and nudges Dean’s shoulder, tries a smile. “But couldn’t you have called first?”

Dean shoves his hands into his coat pockets and doesn’t look up from the floor. “I emailed you,” he says, quiet like Dean always is around strangers. “But, uh, you didn’t get back to me, and I never got your number, so—” He finally does look up, and shrugs, but Sam’s seeing it, now—his eyes are a little too wide, his face too pale. “Sammy, I need to talk to you. About, um. Family business.”


Jenn’s still standing there, just inside the doorway, and he smiles at her apologetically. “Jenn, can you give us a minute? I’m sorry, it’s kind of a… private family thing.”

She’s frowning, a little, but she also says, “Sure,” with a small smile at Dean that he won’t see because he still isn’t looking at her. She ties her bathrobe a little more securely and steps over to give Sam a peck on the cheek. He squeezes her hand, grateful. “I’m going back to bed. I’d love to talk to you in the morning, Dean,” she says, polite, and then slips into their bedroom and closes the door softly behind her.

“She’s the best,” Sam tries, but Dean’s still—he’s still so pale, and he nods but he’s not moving, silent and immobile and for a moment utterly alien in their half-clean, bright kitchen. “Dean?”

“Dad’s gone,” he blurts out, and then it’s Sam’s turn to freeze. Dean grabs at him, curls cold fingers tight into Sam’s bare forearm like he’s got to keep Sam from getting away. “He’s missing and I haven’t heard from him in weeks, Sam, and I don’t—I don’t know what to do. Something’s wrong, I know it, and I just—we have to find him, okay, because—”

“Okay,” Sam says, again, but really it’s just to stop the increasing speed of Dean’s voice. “Here, come here—” and he takes Dean’s wrist, pulls him as gently as he can over to the couch and sits him down. Dean’s shaking, just a little, and this is freaking Sam out. Dean’s never like this, never this panicked about anything. He settles a hand on Dean’s knee, heavy, so the heat and weight will seep in through the fine dark wool. Hopefully it’ll ground him, a little. “Okay, tell me. Why do you think he’s missing? He’s been out of touch before, but he always comes back.”

Dean swallows, hard. His coat’s fallen open, just enough that Sam can see his grey jacket’s a little rumpled, his tie askew.

“He called me,” Dean starts, voice low and rough. He scrubs his hand over his mouth, and it scrapes audibly over that unexpected stubble. “He called after his last research trip was supposed to be over and said he was going to the chapterhouse up in Portsmouth to check out a possible lead on whatever killed Mom, and he wanted me to finish up a translation of the Cor Cordium into Enochian so he’d have it for the Warder there.”

“Still having you do the grunt work, isn’t he,” Sam says, pulling back, and Dean flashes a warning look at him. “Sorry. Just—this isn’t sounding all that out of the ordinary, Dean.”

“He called on the seventh, Sam. Said he was going to call back on the ninth, and to have it ready by
then, and for the first few days, I thought I was missing his calls somehow.” Dean hunches forward, puts his elbows on his knees, so he’s staring at the bare wood between his shoes. “God, I started—I was practically sitting on top of phone, for days, and he never called, and he never called, and I haven’t gotten an alert from Portsmouth, and I just—something’s wrong, Sammy. Something’s just—I can feel it.”

Sam frowns. “But—don’t you think he’s just wrapped up in whatever research he’s doing? He was gone all the time, I just don’t get—”

“He always calls,” Dean interrupts. He folds his hands together so his knuckles stand out, white. “He always calls me, he’s never late on that, because it’s the job. It’s important. If he didn’t call, then something’s wrong. If he’s not dead already, he needs our help.”

There’s a little, shivery tremor in those last few words. Sam runs a hand through his hair, blows out a sigh. “Dean… It’s not that I don’t believe you. It’s just—I kind of doubt Dad wants our help.”

Dean looks up sharply at that, eyes wide. “Sammy—you know he’s not still mad at you.”

Sam snorts at that, can’t help it. “Come on. Dad? He hangs onto a grudge longer than anyone on the planet. I told him I couldn’t stand to be buried down there anymore, that I didn’t want to live my whole life in a bunker. That I needed to see the world, at least a little. He’s the one who said that if I was going to leave, I’d better stay gone.”

Dean looks away, at that. Bites his lips between his teeth. In the half-light from the kitchen he’s still so pale, bruised-looking shadows under his eyes. “I know you wanted something more, and I—I get it,” he says, after a few seconds of silence. “I know you’re not coming back to Lebanon. But Dad’s in trouble, Sam. I’m sorry to invade your life like this, but I don’t think I can do this by myself.”

He looks so tired. “Yeah,” Sam says. He puts a hand on Dean’s shoulder, lean but too bony, even through the layers of shirt, suit jacket, coat. “Yeah, of course I’ll help.”

Sam’s sure that Dean needs to sleep, and his suspicions are proved correct when it turns out that Dean drove straight here from Lebanon—almost a thirty hour trip, the way Dean drives, and he’s been running that whole time on coffee and adrenaline and fear. Sam convinces him to take off the peacoat and close his eyes, just for a few minutes, and it’s only seconds before Dean’s curled up on their lumpy couch, passed out with his forehead pressed up against the threadbare upholstery.

He drums his fingers on the side of his thigh for a minute, looking off into the distance at nothing at all, and then leans over and drags Jenn’s laptop across the coffee table. He checks his BU email account, the one he got when he audited that psych class with Jenn, but there’s nothing there other than the invite to Brandi’s party, the usual spam from the bookstore, the syllabi that Jenn forwards to him in a vain attempt to get him to take more classes. No email from Dean. But then—oh. Oh, shit.

He Googles it to make sure it’s still active and—yeah, there it is. That old as hell website that Dean used to host their email when Dad got approval to install the bunker’s dial-up internet. It takes him a minute to figure out where they’ve moved the email link to, and then another minute to remember his password, and then he’s in, and—there are a dozen unread messages. He scrolls down a little, clicks on the oldest—this one from April 2003.

TO: swinch8128@juno.com

FROM: deanw1915@juno.com

So, Niagara must be pretty amazing if you haven't left yet—I'm still waiting for my postcard, dude. Have you decided where you'll head next? I'm voting for that shoe house place—not sure I believe it's actually real.

Things are still pretty quiet here. Took me a week, but I think I finally have room 37 properly inventoried—there were seven boxes just labeled 'collected bric-a-brac', which turned out to be mostly full of cursed objects. Could've really caused a mess.

Anyway, just checking to see how you're doing.

—D

Sam puts his hands over his face. April was when he’d used the last of his cash reserves to take a Greyhound from Niagara to Boston; when he’d found himself staying in a youth hostel for a few days, walking around the Harvard campus in spring, and he’d stopped a few times into this one cafe because it was close, and cool, and this nice girl called Brandi had sort of fake-flirted with him and offered him a job, and he’d taken it, because—because he didn’t know why. Because he’d been almost across the whole country and he didn’t want to settle, exactly, but he needed cash and he liked Boston. Because just leaving the bunker and the Men of Letters behind hadn’t meant that he’d found his purpose in life, and he wasn’t any more likely to find it on the road than he was here. And then Brandi introduced him to Jenn, from one of her English classes, and then it was just… time. Doing what it did. His emails back and forth to Dean had been getting less frequent, even then, because he was doing things that Dean didn’t want to know about. Things Dean probably wouldn’t understand, locked down underground as he was. Jenn convinced him to audit that one class, and he’d been required to use the new email from the school to communicate with his classmates, and then he’d been so swept up in it all—the new job and the new town and the new girl, the friends that suddenly erupted out of the woodwork, this new life that seemed like it had just been waiting for him to show up. Somehow, in all that, he’d forgotten to check his old email—for gotten to do the most basic thing, the thing he promised Dean he’d do, standing out at the end of the driveway that terrible night after all the fighting and threats were through.

It happens. He knows that. Time moves on, and long-distance relationships fray and falter as daily communication turns into weeks, into months. He just can’t believe—he never realized that he’d be the one guilty of doing that to Dean. To Dean, of all people.

He clicks through the messages. Can’t not, at this point. Wow, Niagara must really be something special, Dean writes, a few weeks later. Only news around here is that the corn harvest is finally coming in—got some really good sweet corn on the last supply run, although I bought too much and wound up eating it for two days straight. Keep forgetting I don’t have to feed your hollow leg anymore.

And then, a month later: Still no postcard—maybe it got lost in the mail. Postal service really isn’t what it used to be. Been practicing my knife-throwing recently, finally starting to get the hang of doing it blindfolded.

A few more short notes, unanswered still. Dean never mentions Dad, doesn’t talk too much about the work he does for the Letters. He talks instead about the fall harvest, how he tried a new pumpkin pie recipe and it worked pretty well. He tells Sam about how the tiny Lebanon Community Library finally got a new librarian, and how they’re going to order some more modern novels (Thank God, he writes, I think I’ve read everything in there twice since we started going by ourselves. Remember, Sammy?)
And then, in November, not long after the anniversary of Mom’s death:

*Haven’t heard from you in a while, brat. Did you meet a pretty girl or something? I worry about you sometimes, out there with no one to watch your back. You’d let me know if anything was wrong, right?*

Sam’s chest is tight. This is—much worse than he’d imagined. There’s a longer gap, after that one—the next email’s from January 2004, just after Dean’s birthday, and there’s no subject line.

*You remember how we used to pretend there were people hiding in the bedrooms when the doors were closed? and we’d try to catch them by opening the doors real fast? it’s weird but sometimes it’s like I can hear them if I’m not doing something that makes noise. started leaving the tv on most of the time, helps a little. it’s just so quiet down here*

you know, dad’s been gone a lot I bet you could come visit if you wanted. you could stay for a couple days and he’d never know. still got your room like you like it and I’m keeping it clean. changes the sheets last month and everything. Promise I wouldn’t tell dad if you came*

*even just a phone call would be nice though it’d have to be short in case dad called. but you could just this once. let me know okay? I miss*

It cuts off, there. Sam sits on his end of the couch with his hand over his mouth, and doesn’t know if Dean meant to delete it, or if he sent it that way on purpose. If he even knows that he sent it. Dean never, ever gets drunk. They always had fine scotch and good bourbon around for guests, because the bunker was in a lot of ways a gentleman’s club, but Dean never touched it, for the most part. Dad would. Not all the time, not like he could have, but there were always those hard few days around November second when it would get bad, and Dean would take Sam and they’d hide in one of the bedrooms, playing Monopoly or cribbage, Dean reading aloud to Sam over the top of any sounds that might come down the long hallways from the library.

How bad it must have been for Dean to get that far gone, Sam thinks, and looks over to where Dean’s still sleeping, hands tucked up against his chest, shoulders hunched in like he’s cold. Sam rubs his fingertips hard over his mouth, then drags his knuckles harshly over both eyes. Dean didn’t write again, after that, until this last email, the one from last week.

*SUBJECT: Dad*

Sam—

*Dad was supposed to check in two weeks ago, and I haven’t heard anything. I know we haven’t talked in a long time, but I think I might need your help on this. Please respond if you get this.*

—Dean

He closes the laptop lid, and sits there looking out the dark windows. He runs his hands through his hair and locks his fingers tight over the back of his neck, thinking of logistics. He took the night off from the bar to go to Brandi’s party, and he’s supposed to be at work in—he checks—god, three hours at the cafe, and their rent is due in two days.

The lights are off when he slips into the bedroom, but when he sits on the edge of the bed Jenn turns right over and looks up at him. “Everything okay?” she whispers.

“Yeah,” Sam says, and then pauses. He fumbles for Jenn’s hand in the sheets and grabs it, tight. “No,” he says, instead. “Not really, baby.”
She turns on the lamp and sits up, but lets him keep hold of her hand. She’s stripped down to her nightie again, one strap falling off her shoulder, and her hair’s an absolute wreck in its half-undone bun, and she’s obviously pretty hungover, but she’s still looking straight at him, steady and calm. Has been waiting for him to come to bed, to make sure everything’s all right. He doesn’t know what he did to deserve this girl.

She searches his face. “Is your brother okay?” she says, eventually, keeping her voice low.

He shakes his head. “It’s—our dad,” he says, and closes his eyes. He’s never told her. Not anything that counts, about what’s really behind him. “He gets really low, this time of year. Because of our mom, you know? He’s up at a family cabin, up in New Hampshire. We’ve just got to go get him and make sure he’s okay.”

“Okay,” she says. She squeezes his hand back. “Can I do anything?”

He huffs a laugh. “No—you’re the greatest, but no. We’ll take care of it.” He clears his throat and rubs the back of her hand with his thumb, tries to figure out what to say. “But, uh. I’m gonna miss a few shifts, at the cafe and the bar, and with rent due—”

Jenn smacks his shoulder and is shaking her head before he’s even halfway through the sentence. “Don’t think about that right now,” she says. “This is your family, Sam. You never see them, and now they’re here and they need you, so that comes first. We’ll figure out the rent. I can ask my dad for a loan if I have to, it’s okay.”

He nods, biting his lip, and then he pulls her in by the back of her neck and kisses her, hard, and again more softly. “I love you,” he says, against her mouth, and she smiles and tugs his hair.

“Yeah, same here,” she says back, but her voice is soft.

He breathes her in for a second, the sleep-stale warmth of her, and then stands up to start throwing some clothes into a bag.

“You’re leaving right now?” she says.

He shrugs, digging through their haphazardly arranged laundry. “I’m awake,” he says, “and it’s not that far. I’m hoping we’ll be able to dig him out and be back in a day or two. Back by the first, hopefully.”

She makes a little hmmm noise, and watches as he pulls together a pair of boots, a few button-downs, jeans and khakis. She frowns a little at the tie he chuck into the bag, and he shrugs, and she rolls her eyes and grins, snuggling back down into the pillow.

“You know,” she says, as he’s closing up his old, battered duffle. “You never let anyone call you Sammy.”

He zips it closed and shrugs, looking up at her. “He’s my brother.”

She nods, looking thoughtful. “Yeah.”

He leans over her and kisses her, on the eyebrow and nose and lips. “See you soon, baby. Get some sleep.”

“You, too, if you can,” she says, and pulls the blankets up to her shoulder. She gives him a little smile, eyes half-closed. “Don’t worry, Sam. Everything’s going to work out okay.”
After Sam gets off the phone with both of his managers, pleading family emergency to secure a few
days off, it takes him a minute to summon up enough cruelty to wake Dean—not that he actually
looks comfortable. He’s rolled over a little, enough so that Sam can study his face. The circles under
his eyes are so dark, and the light coming in from the kitchen casts a shadow off his cheekbone,
knife-sharp. When Sam finally does lean in to shake his shoulder, he’s close enough to see Dean’s
eyes, when they shoot open. They’re bleary and bloodshot, the green standing out like a shock even
in the dim of four a.m.

Dean doesn’t say anything, just stares blankly at Sam like he’s not actually awake. “You up for the
drive to Portsmouth?” Sam tries. Dean’s silent, just looking at him, and a weird panic starts to flutter
against the back of Sam’s throat as they stare at each other. What if he’s actually—what if
something’s, like really wrong—

But then Dean’s eyes go wide and he swallows, shifting back into the tight-lipped expression from
before. “Yeah. Yeah, okay,” he says, pushing himself up on one elbow. He scrubs at his face with
the other hand. “Where’d you put my coat?”

Sam hands it over, pointedly taking the car keys out of the pocket as he does. He gets a quick
grimace for that, but no real protest. Dean puts his coat on one sleeve at a time, clumsy as a little kid
with the arm holes, and then Sam’s chivvying him down the stairs to the ground floor and out onto
the street. The Impala’s half a block up, parked at an awkward angle that would’ve earned Dean a
ticket any other time of day, gleaming and glossy in the light from the streetlamps filtering through
the bare trees. It’s weird, the sudden rush of childhood memories that come pouring in at the sight, at
the creak in the doors that Dean never oiled out. He settles behind the wheel and the surge of
memory is even stronger when the engine rumbles throatily to life. Okay. He can admit that he
missed the car.

The Dean who’d taught Sam to drive had all but hovered on top of him every time they made the five
minute run to and from town, warning him to be mindful of the shocks and to go slow over the
gravel patches. By the time Sam eases out of their neighborhood and angles them toward the
highway out of town, this Dean's passed out in the passenger seat, curled in on himself like he was
on the couch, head leaned up against the window. The headlights of a passing car catch over his pale
skin, across the engraving on the dark platinum ring on his left hand, where he’s holding his coat
closed against the cold, like a shield.

Sam swallows, but then the light turns green and he has to pay attention to driving, to the road, and
not just worry over his brother.

Maybe it's the early-morning darkness, or the hard winds that have stripped the trees of their last
autumn leaves, but the road seems more desolate than he remembers from the handful of times he's
made the trip out of town, with Jenn. A few cars pass as he’s leaving Boston, but it’s nothing like
what the traffic will be like in an hour. Dean breathes steadily beside him and it’s only half-familiar.
He blinks hard at the road, trying not to get hypnotized by the dotted line disappearing under the car.
He’s used to being up at this hour, but usually he's the one curled up in the corner of a seat, dozing
on the bus. Dean starts to snore, just a little. No help there. He leans over and fumbles in the
glovebox—and, yeah, their parents’ few old tapes are still there. He picks a cassette at random and
slots it in, just to have something to keep himself awake. Quiet guitar, familiar voice from when he
and Dean would camp out in the garage, listening to music and pretending like they were on a road
trip, like from the movies. This will work. *Homeward Bound* carries him north, volume on low so it
won’t disturb Dean.
Signs for Portsmouth start showing up after an hour on the highway, and he pulls off toward a McDonald’s with relief. He needs caffeine. He shuts off the engine and scrubs his hands through his hair, sighing into the sudden silence. Dean’s still slumped against the door, but he’s relaxed, finally—his arm loose in his lap, his fingers lax and open.

“Hey,” Sam says, quiet, and nudges Dean’s elbow. Dean sucks in a sharp breath, straightening up, and then he’s blinking in confusion at their surroundings. He looks across the bench seat to Sam, who tries a smile. “We’re just outside Portsmouth, but I was thinking—coffee?”

Dean rubs a hand over his face, and doesn’t say anything, but he nods. Sam opens his door and grimaces against the flood of cold air, getting out and stretching a little. The air’s damp, and it’ll probably be a foggy day once the sun actually comes up. He nudges the driver’s door closed with his hip and waits, hands shoved into his pockets. After a few seconds, there’s an answering creak from the passenger door, and Dean gets out with a groan, wrapping his coat tightly around himself.

It’s almost blinding inside after the haze of dark morning without, but it’s warm. Sam moves to the back of the short line, Dean following close behind. There’s a semi-pleasant fug in here of salt and grease and, most importantly, coffee—and then it’s their turn, the big trucker ahead of them moving off to the side, and he urges Dean ahead of him, to the register.

“Morning, welcome to McDonald’s, what can I get you today,” the girl rattles off, bored, and Sam looks to Dean, who’s frowning up at the glossy-bright menu.

“Um,” Dean says, after a second. “Coffee?”

“Yeah,” the girl says, punching it in. “That it?”

Dean opens his mouth, and closes it, his eyes flicking back up to the crowded menu, and a moment passes before Sam’s brain kicks back online and he realizes—“Oh, sorry,” he cuts in, with a hand on Dean’s arm. “We’re a little—two sausage McMuffins, four hash browns, two coffees,” he says, in a rush, and the girl rolls her eyes and puts her hand out for the money, and he hates her for a second, but it’s not like she could be expected to deal with an adult who’s only ever seen a fast food place in the commercials, and has never stepped inside one.

He stuffs his change into his jacket pocket and pulls Dean along by the elbow to one of the shiny plastic booths. “Here, sit,” Sam says. “I’ll grab the stuff when it’s done.”

Dean does, slipping into the booth with his face turned away, toward the dark window. Sam leans one hip up against the edge of the table and watches the red-uniformed workers bustling away in the kitchen, thoughts far away. God, he needs coffee. When one of the kids calls their order he grabs the tray as quickly as he can without spilling, hustling the few yards back to where Dean’s waiting. The trucker gives him an odd look as he passes, glancing between him and Dean, and there’s a weird shock in his belly before he gives his blandest smile in response, makes sure his eyes slide smoothly away to the tray so he’ll look nonchalant. He puts the tray in the center of their table and drops onto his side of the booth; when he glances back towards the counter, the trucker’s lost interest, and Sam blows out a long breath of relief. He hopes he isn’t visibly flushed. He’s been out of the game so long that he forgot the most basic rule Dad drilled into them: don’t be noticed, ever. Blend in.

First step of that is to mimic the normal people all around, the ones he’s been mimicking for the last four years, so he keeps his head down and focuses on dumping as much creamer into his coffee as the cup allows, just to bring the temperature down so he can drink it immediately. His three a.m. wake up call has settled its weight into his joints and bones and he’s not going to be able to think well enough to get them both through to lunchtime, let alone well enough to help Dean find Dad.
A few gulps down and he feels like he might be able to face Dean’s desperate-eyed blankness again. When he looks, though, Dean’s not freaking out, or too-still, or wearing that unfamiliar pale strangeness. Instead, he’s frowning down at the food in front of him. “I thought you ordered hash browns,” he says after a moment, baffled, and finally, there’s a trace of the brother Sam remembers.

“Yeah, that’s what we got,” he says, and takes a bite of his own. It mostly tastes like salt and fried, and burns his tongue, but it’s enough to remind his stomach of how empty it is and he winds up eating the whole thing in two bites.

Dean looks between Sam and his breakfast, clearly dubious. Sam scoots the little paper bag closer to him. “It’s edible, I promise,” he says. “Eat up. I want to get out of here and over to the chapterhouse—we need to go in and figure out the last time they’ve seen him. Hell, he might still be there.”

"Yeah," Dean says, prodding the hash brown with one finger and frowning, before he slides it away from him again. "But—um, I'm not supposed to be here."

That’s enough to stop Sam with his McMuffin halfway to his mouth. "What do you mean?"

Dean shrugs, not looking up at him, and fiddles with the wrapper on his own sandwich. "There's always supposed to be someone in the bunker. I'm the second. With Dad gone—"

Sam drags a hand over his face. "So, they can't see you. Which means I have to go in alone. Great."

Dean shrugs again. He wraps both hands around his coffee and finally looks at Sam, eyes still heavy but his mouth quirked into a little attempt at a smile. “Don’t suppose you thought to bring a tie?”

The sky’s just barely beginning to lighten when Sam turns left at the synagogue and pulls up opposite a featureless brick building, the back half of which is gradually being engulfed by dying bushes and ivy. “You sure this is it?” he asks, killing the engine. “There isn’t even a house number.”

“Pretty sure I would’ve heard from Dad if the directions I gave him were wrong,” Dean says, and he has a point, though he’s putting it mildly. “See the door in the ivy? That’s where you’re going.”

Sam squints through the windshield, but the streetlight’s too far away, and the shadows are heavy. “I guess,” he says, and he knows he sounds dubious but—well, Dean will just have to deal. “The knock’s the same as the bunker?"

“Home and all the chapterhouses.” Dean sounds confident, at least about this, so Sam tries to draw on that to settle his own nerves. Dean passes over the neatly sealed manila envelope. “You remember the passphrase?”

The temptation to say no and buy a few more minutes is pretty strong, but—“Yeah,” he says instead, and tosses the keys to Dean before getting out. The creak and slam of the car door echoes off the surrounding brick, makes Sam’s pulse jump in his throat. He closes his eyes for a second. Tries to slow his breathing.

“Sammy,” Dean says, behind him, and he turns to find Dean with one elbow out on the rolled-down window, biting his lip, brows tight and worried as he looks up at Sam. “You—you can’t let them know Dad’s missing. If they start to think that he’s gone again—if they think it’s unguarded—”

“I know, Dean,” he says, and he’d feel bad about the edge of impatience in his voice, but he needs to get his game-face on. Dean’s eyes flick down, away, his expression shuttering just that fast, and Sam sighs. He’s out of practice. “Why don’t you drive down the street, get yourself more coffee. I
Dean nods, but doesn’t say anything. Sam turns back to the facade of the alleged chapterhouse. After a second the Impala rumbles back to life and pulls away, leaving Sam alone on the dark sidewalk. He checks that his tie is straight and tries to smooth the wrinkles in his button-down before giving up and just zipping his hoodie up a little higher. It’s not exactly formalwear, not with the cuffs starting to fray and the hole in one armpit. At least it’s just a plain, somber grey—and he’s dithering, again. He takes a deep breath and crosses the empty street, forcing himself to look confident as he trots up the neatly-swept brick steps.

There’s a bronze Aquarian star inlaid into the dark mahogany of the door—discreet, but there if you know what you’re looking for, which at least means he won’t be faced with an irate homeowner when he knocks. One-two. One. One-two-three. There’s a long minute of silence, and he shivers a little as a breeze whips up the street, wishing he’d put on another layer—or had a real coat, like Dean’s. Not that he could afford it.

The door opens as silently as the doors in the bunker always had, catching him a little off-guard, and he’s faced with a man who might be a Roman statue come to life—close-cropped hair, strong nose, heavy brow. “Yes?” the man says, tone even.

“Sorry to bother you, but is this the home of Edward Kelley?” He almost expects his voice to crack like he’s fourteen, but it holds steady.

The man doesn’t change expression. “How do you know him?”

“His cousin Mr. Dee sent me,” Sam answers, and is rewarded by the barest flicker of a smile before the porter steps back to let him in.

“And your name, sir?” the porter asks once the door is closed again behind them.

“Sam Winchester.” It’s hard not to stare around at the intricately-carved, dark wood paneling lining the foyer. The bunker, despite the fine craftsmanship that went into making it, is still a bunker. This is like stepping into a different world altogether.

“Mr. Winchester. If you’ll make yourself comfortable, I’ll ask if the Warder can see you.” Sam’s ushered into a small room with yet more wood paneling, opulent rugs, and heavy leather-and-mahogany furniture, as masculine and comfortable-looking as what he grew up with. The air smells of linseed oil. The door closes silently behind the porter, the only sound the click of the latch—which Sam tests, after a moment, and finds locked.

Which—well, it isn’t unexpected, but his pulse still kicks up again. He can’t hear a thing past the door, no matter how he strains, and after a few moments he steps away. He distracts himself by studying the details of the room. The carvings in the paneling conceal pentagram devil’s traps, sigils from a few different magical traditions, and long strings of script he thinks might be Enochian. He really is out of practice. When he looks up he finds an immaculate copy of the full heptagram Key of Solomon, inlaid into the ceiling with painstaking attention to detail. He shakes his head, huffing out a little laugh, and looks back down at the carpet. He’s probably the safest he’s been since he left home, but he’d far rather be out in the Impala again with Dean, or curled up in bed with Jenn, far away from all of this.

He makes himself sit down, in one of the plush leather armchairs so that he’s facing the door. The envelope’s getting damp in his hands and he puts it on the low coffee table so he can scrub his palms dry over his thighs. His knee keeps jumping without his permission and he forces himself still, folding his hands into a neat knot in his lap. He’s supposed to be projecting confidence.
“Mr. Winchester?” He jumps a little at the porter’s voice, at the suddenly open door, and hides it by standing, more or less smoothly. “Warder Haight.”

The warder is a few inches shorter than Dean, his hair iron-grey, his eyes watchful. Despite that the sun’s not even up yet, he’s fully dressed and ready for the day, wearing a suit of such obvious quality that Sam’s made excruciatingly aware of the grease spot that’s never come out of his own khakis.

“That’ll be all, James, thank you,” Haight says, and the porter leaves without another sound, the door closing quietly behind him. Haight offers Sam an extended, ink-stained hand. “I assume you’re one of John Winchester’s boys?”

Sam returns the handshake, firmly, as he was taught. “Yes, sir.” Sam steps back to the coffee table and scoops up Dean’s folder, their flimsy pretext. “We prepared the translation as your chapterhouse requested, but we ended up playing phone tag with our father a few times, and I just thought it’d end up being faster to bring it to you directly rather than trying to get it to him first.”

Hopefully it doesn’t sound as ridiculous as he thinks it does. Haight takes the folder from him and breaks the wax seal to flip through Dean’s work. After a moment, he nods and looks back up at Sam. “Outstanding. Fine work, as always. This will make an excellent addition to our library.” He tucks the folder under one arm and gives Sam a brief smile. “Anything else?”

It’s exactly the opening he needed, but his lips are so dry that he has to lick them before he can get out the real reason he’s here. “I was hoping to catch my father for a cup of coffee before I left—is he here right now, by any chance?”

Haight raises his eyebrows. “Winchester? No, he left… oh, just about three weeks ago. Off on another one of his field trips, I expect. Didn’t he call back to the bunker?”

It’s what he expected, mostly, but he still has to breathe in slowly to mask the blow to the gut. “Oh, I—I see,” he says, and forces a rueful smile. “I was on a trip of my own, so I might’ve missed it. I’ll have to check my messages. Sorry about the confusion, sir.”

Haight waves a hand, dismissing the apology. “You’re welcome, of course, to stay a little while, peruse the library,” he says. “James has recently perfected his flat white, which I’m told is some kind of coffee.”

Sam bites the inside of his cheek against a hysterical laugh. “No, thank you, sir,” he says, and his voice wavers only a little. Haight nods, but before he can be dismissed Sam takes a chance, says, “I don’t suppose—my father didn’t leave any messages, before he left?”

Haight frowns, a little, but then shakes his head. “I don’t mean to denigrate your family, son, but your father’s not exactly the most forthcoming man I’ve ever met. You should call back home to your brother, I’m sure he has your father’s itinerary. At least there’s one organized Winchester, hm?”

Sam forces another smile. “Yes, sir,” he says, and Haight shakes his hand again, and then the door’s open and the porter is ushering Sam through warm foyer, hoping that he’ll have a good day, and then the chapterhouse’s door closes behind him and he’s standing out on the cold bricks, empty-handed. It’s no more than he expected, but his stomach’s still sour with worry.

The Impala’s waiting, a gleaming-dark shadow parked across the dark street, and he buries his hands in his hoodie pockets as he walks back toward Dean, trying to think how he’s going to break it to him—and then Dean gets out of the driver’s side, and Sam forgets what he was going to say, because Dean looks—his eyes are wild, and wet, and he’s got a newspaper half-crumpled in his hand, and he says, “Sammy—I don’t—” and Sam grabs his shoulder, hard, because Dean looks like
he’s about to pass out.

“What is it?” Sam says, but instead of answering Dean shoves the paper into Sam's hands and sort of collapses back against the car, pulling away from Sam’s grip. He opens his mouth, but closes it again with a shudder, clutching white-knuckled at the car’s door frame.

Baffled, Sam squints down at the paper, tilting it to catch the edge of the streetlight’s glow—there’s nothing there, nothing he can see beyond the usual political stuff, and below that some debate about contaminated water, and a football report, and Dean’s still not saying anything, still looks like he might faint. Sam flips the paper over to check below the fold, and there it is: Police still seeking information related to mysterious death. He skims through the article, catching at the relevant details: body found almost three weeks ago, in his fifties, Caucasian, over six feet tall, dark hair, but the spokesman said the precinct will not release the name until the victim’s family may be found and informed. Anyone with further information—

"I'm sure it's not him, Dean." He says it almost without thinking, realizing a moment later it’s true. And—and it is, but Dean just closes his eyes and sinks down to the Impala’s bench seat, white-faced, his hand still clenched so hard around the steel frame that it looks like it hurts. The dread settles in Sam’s stomach, no matter that he’s sure.

“It’s not him,” Sam repeats, because it’s impossible for John Winchester to be dead. They would know, somehow. Dean shakes his head, takes a deep shuddery breath and buries his face in his free hand, hunches over, and Sam—his gut twists, but he looks away, back down at the article, because Dean’s so—so raw-edged, his grief too vivid. Sam steps back, newspaper crumpling in his hands. It’s impossible that Dad is dead. Not like this, not now. “It’s not,” he says, again, more firmly, but Dean doesn’t look up, doesn’t acknowledge Sam at all. Sam bites his lips between his teeth and turns away, looks down the desolate street. Off to the east, behind the old brick buildings, dawn is slowly lightening the sky to grey, and the first hints of fog are rising under the corner streetlight, and Dean’s breathing is audible, and wet, and Sam closes his eyes, feels the dread harden to a rock in his gut. It can’t be him, he thinks to himself, but he doesn’t again say it out loud.

* Dr. Mueller is the attendant on duty at the Portsmouth Regional morgue, and he’s older than Dean, though not by much. What’s more, he’s easily impressed by the FBI badge belonging to Agent Robert Darrin that Dean produces, which gets them in past the desk while Mueller opens the big glass door into the bright, chilly autopsy room.

“T’m not all that surprised you boys have come up, if I’m honest,” Mueller (“call me Phil”) is saying, but Sam isn’t paying much attention. He shivers into Dean’s borrowed coat as they enter the blast of air conditioning, a step behind his suddenly-confident brother. Dean, in his third-day suit with his heavy stubble and the dark hollows under his eyes, is walking around like he owns the place, bluffing his way into Phil’s confidence with sharp, practiced-sounding lies. Sam wraps Dean’s coat more tightly around himself, hiding his hoodie, the stain on the thigh of his khakis, but it doesn’t look like the guy plans on asking many more questions. Phil’s chattering away, marking something down on a clipboard. Sam can’t imagine what it’s like to spend your days surrounded by dead bodies, mostly alone.

Dean stands next to the autopsy table, under the barrage of Phil’s commentary about the weather and the cold and how it’s Halloween, and doesn’t that always bring out the crazies, and he doesn’t say a word. He’s laser-focused, slightly wide-eyed and white around the lips, tension clear in his straight back, his rigid shoulders. Sam doesn’t know where all this is coming from, but they’re in, and if Phil would just shut up already—
Portsmouth being the size it is, the morgue’s not huge; just a dozen of the huge metal drawers line the far wall of the autopsy room, clipboards hung next to each one. Finally, Phil stops writing whatever the hell he’s been writing and goes to the drawer labeled number eight, on the far right of the middle row, checking its clipboard for a second. “Yeah, here we are,” he says, but hesitates before pulling the drawer open, looking back to the two of them with a friendly grimace.

"I've got to warn you gentlemen," he says, nose wrinkled. “It's not a pleasant sight. Still haven't figured out how it was done, but it's the first thing to turn my stomach in at least five years."

“Just show us,” Dean says, a snap in his voice.

Phil shrugs, warning made. He beckons Dean a step closer, slides the drawer out, and folds the sheet back in a practiced, almost delicate flip.

Dean's standing in front of Sam, blocking his view so he can’t actually see the corpse’s face when it’s revealed. Sam's staring at Dean's back and knows it isn't their dad because all the tension drains away, in an instant—so fast that Dean actually sways just a little before finding his equilibrium again.

“See what I mean?” Phil says, shaking his head. “Not looking forward to having to show the family, if they ever come out of the woodwork.”

Sam takes a step forward to stand at Dean’s side. Relief’s making him lightheaded, but they’re still playing their parts, and Phil clearly wants to share. He’s never seen a fresh dead body before, although he's seen a few decayed down to skin and bone and hair. There’s no smell, with the corpse being kept as cold as it is, but—god, Phil’s right, this is nasty.

The autopsy has been done, so the man’s covered in Frankenstein stitches, an alien black against his waxy-sallow skin. Much worse are the gaping, rust-red hollows where his eyes should have been, and Sam’s gorge rises, fast enough that he has to swallow a few times before he can speak.

“What happened?” he says, finally.

“No idea,” Phil says, cheerfully enough. “Police said he was alone in the room when he was found, and it was locked from the inside. Window was locked, too, so nobody came in and stabbed his eyes out unless they could go through walls. I cracked him open and he was pretty healthy—standard bad diet, probably, but his ticker was in pretty good shape for a guy in his fifties.”

Dean shifts his weight a little, and Sam glances over but Dean's just staring into the distance, lack of tension leaving his expression blank. “So…?” Sam says.

Phil shrugs, leaning casually on the extended drawer. “All signs point to an overdose on some kind of opiate, but there are no traces of unusual medication in the bloodstream, none of the usual stuff I’d expect to see. Bleeding from the ears, nose, mouth, not really consistent with the OD. Plus there’s the eye thing.” He folds his arms over his chest, looking down at the corpse’s slack, ruined face. “No obvious break in, plus blood under the fingernails and those gouges may indicate that he scratched his own eyes out—cops have been arguing about that one, I can tell you.”

“I bet,” Sam says, frowning. When he shoves his revulsion aside, he can see the marks Phil’s talking about—gashes under the empty eye sockets, which could easily be made by fingernails. This is actually… very strange.

Dean stirs, finally, and clears his throat. “Thank you for your help,” he says, voice a little formal, and turns on his heel to go. Sam, caught off guard, stands frozen for a second, and he’s about to call for Dean to wait a second when Phil says, “Wait, Agent, didn’t you want to look at the other body?”
“What?” Sam blurts out.

“Yeah, I thought that’s why—isn’t that why you guys came today?” Phil says, looking between the two of them with a furrowed brow. “Second body dropped, at the inn, I figured that was why—”

“Yes,” Sam interrupts, trying to sound authoritative. “Sorry, I thought you were talking about something—yes, tell us about the second body.”

“Right,” Phil says, relaxing, and goes to drawer six, pulling it out with a clang. “This one died just last night, so I haven’t actually gotten to do the full work-up yet, but we’re probably looking at something similar.”

This time, when the sheet’s flipped back, it reveals an older woman—maybe in her sixties or seventies, grey hair clipped close to her head with the ugly line of the coroner’s stitch-work bisecting her sagging face. She still has her eyes, at least.

“No obvious physical trauma, but she had some of the same bleeding—ears, mouth, et cetera. Doesn’t look like a junkie, but if the tests come back like I expect them to, then we’re gonna be looking at a second overdose without any signs of a drug being taken.”

This time, when the sheet’s flipped back, it reveals a younger woman—maybe in her twenties or thirties, grey hair with the ugly line of the coroner’s stitch-work bisecting her sagging face. She still has her eyes, at least.

“No obvious physical trauma, but she had some of the same bleeding—ears, mouth, et cetera. Doesn’t look like a junkie, but if the tests come back like I expect them to, then we’re gonna be looking at a second overdose without any signs of a drug being taken.”

Sam rubs a hand over his mouth, staring down at the dead woman’s face. “ Weird,” he says, absently.

Phil snorts. “ Just a bit.” He flips the sheets back over the corpses, slides their drawers closed and locks them back up. “So, any assistance you can give to the good old boys at the Portsmouth PD for Grandma and dead Fred over there would be greatly appreciated, I bet.”

“Yeah,” Sam says, thinking, and then says, “Hey, Phil, can you remind us, what’s the name of the lead detective for—”

“We’ve got it,” Dean cuts in. Sam glances back to find Dean giving him a direct, almost irritated look, before he looks back at Phil and gives a false-looking smile. “Thank you for your help,” he says, again, in that weird formal voice, and this time he really does head out the door, immediately, so that Sam has no choice but to follow.

“Thanks,” Sam says over his shoulder, and Phil waves a hand, looking puzzled, but not as puzzled as Sam is right now.

He follows Dean up the stairs out of the hospital basement, out of the beige waiting room and to the parking lot, but when Dean’s about to unlock the car, Sam says, “Wait a second.”

Dean stops, and drops his head for a second, with a sigh, before turning around. The sun’s up, finally, and though it’s a grey misty morning he can still see how drained Dean is, how drawn, his face still tight with worry. It’s not the deep, untenable grief of before, at least, but now—even if their dad’s not in the morgue, he’s still missing, and Sam runs a hand through his neatly-combed fake FBI hairstyle, mussing it irretrievably. Which reminds him—

“Hey, how’d you do all that, in there?” he says, instead of the question he wants to ask. Dean frowns, not understanding. “I mean, all the—FBI stuff. You were pretty convincing.”

Dean’s frown clears up, and he leans back against the Impala’s sidepanel. “Oh, uh. Dad taught me. After you left.”

Sam raises his eyebrows. “Dad taught you how to... fake being FBI.”

Dean pulls the fake badge out of his jacket’s interior pocket, just where Sam had kept his Mulder
badge—god, that was just last night. “Part of Letters training,” Dean says, smoothing a thumb over the tiny laminated picture of himself. “Making IDs, imitating authority, in case we need to take over a case to divert it to hunters in the area. FBI’s easiest, I guess. Dad taught me how to—how to sound right.”

Sam bites the inside of his cheek. How to sound like an FBI agent, but not how to order breakfast. “He teach you anything about whatever that was?” Sam says, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at the hospital entrance.

His voice maybe came out a little sharper than he intended, because Dean sighs again, looking up from his homemade badge. “Yeah,” he says, and he’s not arguing, but it’s flat, defeated. “To leave it to the experts. If it turns out to be something, the chapterhouse will catch wind of it and farm it out to someone.”

Sam shakes his head, cutting a hand through the air. “No, they won’t,” he says, and it’s hard to keep the bitter edge out of his voice. “They’ll wait, and wait, and if a pattern establishes itself they’ll eventually call the one hunter they trust and hope he’s in the area, and in the meantime, people are going to die.”

Dean tucks the fake badge back into his pocket, going for the driver’s door. “It’s not our problem, Sam,” he says, fumbling the keys out of his pocket and keeping his eyes on his hands. “We’re beholders.”

It’s an old argument, one Sam had with their dad a few dozen times before the last, disastrous one, but it’s still galling to have Dean take the man’s side even when he’s not here. “That’s bull,” Sam says, and slaps a hand down on the Impala’s door before Dean can pull it open. Dean falls back a little, doesn’t look up. “It’s bull,” Sam says, more loudly, “and you know it. Dad’s been going out in the world as long as I can remember, and I’m damn sure he’s doing more than beholding.”

Dean’s still. After a second, he clears his throat. “Whatever he does, he’s missing now,” he says, face turned away like he’s talking to the car. “And I’m out of leads, and I—I’ve been away from the bunker. What if he’s gone back there, or if he’s been trying to call—”

Sam grabs his wrist, and Dean crashes to a halt, eyes shooting up to Sam’s in shock. “Dean, it’s been weeks, you said it yourself,” he says. Dean’s eyes flick away and Sam shakes his wrist a little, drags his attention right back. “Weeks. If he didn’t call for that long, he didn’t call in the two days you’ve been gone. And, Dean—you saw those bodies. That wasn’t an overdose. The guy died three weeks ago, but that woman was just last night. What if the next one is coming, and we could’ve stopped it?”

“We can tell the Warder,” Dean says, after a moment.

“We can tell the Warder,” Sam starts, and then sighs. He lets go of Dean’s wrist and backs off. “This is happening now. It’s not in a book, it’s not research to be done as an—an intellectual exercise, or something.”

Dean rubs the back of his neck. “It’s protocol, Sam,” he says, but it’s said a little weakly, and—there. That’s the in Sam was hoping for—that’s the brother who he could convince to let him slip out of the bunker sometimes, who didn’t force him to drill his Greek vocabulary when he wanted to watch cartoons, instead. This situation’s a bit different, sure, but he’ll take it.

“Look,” Sam says, and grabs the discarded newspaper out of the backseat. He puts the paper against Dean’s chest, taps at the article that started this. “It said the guy was found at the Sise Inn, right? And—Dr. Mueller said that the old lady was found at the inn, too. There’s obviously something going on there.”
Dean takes the paper, slowly, dropping his eyes to the newsprint. He’s frowning, but it’s not protest—he’s scanning the article, obviously thinking.

Sam licks his lips. “Tell you what,” he says, after a second. “I’ll go back to the chapterhouse. I’ll talk to the Warder about it. But it can’t hurt anything for you to check out the inn.” Dean glances up from the paper, brows pinched together, and Sam puts up his hands, placating. “I’m not saying you have to do anything, it’s just—you know what to look for, Dean. You know the signs—cold spots, weird noises, sulfur. If it turns out to be nothing, then okay, it’s nothing. But if it turns out to be something, at least we can get the Warder some information. And if he won’t do anything…” He shrugs. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, I guess.”

Dean’s silent, looking at him. “It’s the Warder’s decision to make,” he says, eventually. He tosses the paper into the backseat, then folds his arms over his chest. “I’m not even supposed to be here. Actually, neither of us are. And you never wanted anything to do with this, so why are you so gung-ho about the supernatural, all of a sudden?”

He doesn’t sound angry, or bitter. Just tired. He always sounded tired, after these arguments, and Sam swallows hard. He meets Dean’s eyes, and doesn’t back down. "We know what's out there. We should help, when we can. Save people, when we can."

Dean searches his face for a moment. Sam shrugs, tucking his hands into the pockets of his borrowed coat, and for some reason that makes the tiniest hint of a smile flicker at the corner of Dean’s mouth.

“Okay,” Dean says. He shakes his head a little, but his face has relaxed at last. He jerks his head toward the car. “Let’s go, then. But you’re giving my coat back, brat.”

“Fine, nerd,” Sam says, on automatic, and Dean gives him a real—if small—smile, and it’s like a dislocated bone slipping back into place. It feels easy, between them, at last. He shrugs off the coat and tosses it into Dean’s chest so Dean has to fumble to catch it before it hits the ground. “But it’s your turn to drive.”

Sam knocks on the chapterhouse door for the second time that morning—_one-two, one, one-two-three_—and his smile is fixed at ‘rueful’ when James opens the door, and blinks at him.

“Mr. Winchester,” he says, after the barest pause. “Please, come in.”

He’s once again ushered into the warm, dark-panelled foyer, the chilly October morning cut out behind him when James relocks the door.

“How may I help you, Mr. Winchester?” James says, evenly.

“You know, I was wondering if I could take you up on that coffee,” Sam says. He’d worked out how he was going to play this on the drive over, dredging up every memory he has of the majority of Letters who’d interned at the bunker: relaxed, confident, smug. He shifts his eyes away from James and glances around the foyer, diffident, like all this is no more than he expects. Hopefully smoother than last time. “I tried a diner down the way and what they were serving—well, dishwater might be a better term.”

“Of course,” James says, nodding, like this is totally normal, and Sam tucks his hands into the pockets of his khakis, follows the man through the left-hand door opposite the heavily warded receiving room into a small, well-lit library. “If you’ll wait here a moment.”

“Of course,” Sam says, biting the inside of his cheek against letting his smile get any wider, and then
he’s alone again, and he blows out a short breath. It’s less than a minute of looking around at the subtle spellwork scrolling through the bookcases, running a fingertip down the spine of a leather-bound collection of Vanir warsongs, before the door opens again, and Haight says, “Didn’t expect to see you again so soon, young Winchester.”

The porter ran straight to his Warder to inform him of a visitor: Letters protocol, coming through exactly as Dean said it would. Sam turns, small smile in place, and finds the Warder relaxed in the doorway, some book tucked under his arm and a china cup in hand. “Yes, sir,” Sam says, all ease. “Well, I thought I’d take up your offer on that coffee, and I thought, since I don’t have to be getting back right away, maybe I could take a look around the house. If it’s alright with you, of course.”

“Certainly, certainly,” Haight says, though he’s giving Sam an inscrutable look. “Come, have breakfast. James was just about to lay it out. No initiates in the house today, so it’ll just be you and me.”

Sam opens his mouth, and closes it. That wasn’t quite— “I wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble, sir,” he says, but Haight just shakes his head and says, “Nonsense, come up,” and then there’s nothing Sam can do but follow him out of the library, up the wide wooden staircase to the second floor, through a door warded so strongly that Sam feels the press of magic against his skin as he walks through it, and then he’s in the Warder’s beautiful, richly appointed apartment, where James is already laying a second place at the dining table at the far end of the parlor.

The tablecloth is a snowy white; the settings are china; the breakfast is laid under sterling silver. James removes the covers from the dishes to reveal eggs and sausage, fat black grapes, a warmer of perfectly made toast.

“Sit, sit,” Haight says, and so Sam sits, and James serves him neat portions of everything in silence while Haight says something inane about the fog, and Sam automatically says something inane back, and for some reason this is making him feel like a much worse impostor than he did earlier this morning. Haight is utterly at ease, of course, and so Sam mimics him—that old lesson coming through again when James comes back into the room after a moment of them eating in silence and places a flat white neatly at Sam’s right hand, and Sam has to bite back a surge of hilarity at being served his own damn specialty with such solemnity.

“How is it?” Haight says, nodding at the cup.

Sam takes a sip. It’s actually— “Perfect,” he says, setting the little cup on its china plate. Better than his, not that he can admit that out loud.

Haight shakes his head. “Can’t understand it myself,” he says, with a one-shouldered shrug. He’s leaned back in his chair, his own black coffee in hand, watching Sam. Inscrutable, again. “Sam Winchester. Your family has quite the legacy built up, son.”

That’s not what Sam was expecting, and his "I suppose we do," slips out a little more bitterly than he’d intended.

Haight's eyes narrow at his tone for a second, but it’s impossible to tell what he’s thinking. “What level are you now?” he asks after a long moment of excruciating scrutiny. Sam takes a large mouthful of the coffee to buy himself time to come up with a response that’s true. He doesn’t know what kind of spellwork the room is under, but a curse against liars isn’t out of the question.

He finally settles on, “I’m still at school, sir, in Boston.”

Haight brightens a little. “And how do you find Harvard at this time of year? The campus is
spectacular when the trees are in full autumnal color.”

Sam imagines Jenn or Brandi’s faces, at this guy just assuming he’d be wearing the crimson. He smiles, politely. “I’m actually at Boston University, sir.”

There’s a moment where Sam can almost see the mental dissonance. “Ah. Well, that’s fine.” Haight leans back in his chair. “Once you graduate, I’m sure you’ll be initiated as soon as possible. Any idea where you’d like to end up?”—and there’s the opening Sam’s been looking for, so he sets his coffee down and sits up a bit straighter.

“No, sir, though I don’t expect to return to the Kansas location. My brother’s always been more suited to looking after the bunker—and working under our father.” Too much truth, maybe, but it has Haight nodding, so Sam keeps going. “I’ve been looking around, and was actually thinking about here, if you don’t mind my saying. I’ve read quite a bit about the hauntings. All these inns—any truth to that?”

Haight lets out an immediate sharp bark of laughter, shaking his head. “Sorry to disappoint you, but no.”

Which—Sam had expected, but there’d been a small hope that the chapterhouse would’ve already been on top of the matter. Just once, it would have been nice to be proven wrong by the Letters. He selects a piece of toast, focuses on buttering it to help hide his disappointment. “None, really? I thought I read something about the Sise Inn, how the ghosts had killed a guest.”

Haight smiles, rueful. “Easy to blame the ghosts, isn’t it. No, we cleared all these so-called hauntings years ago.” Coffee in one hand, he waves the other dismissively. “The Sise haunting, for example, probably the town’s best-known—nothing more than the imaginings of a madman.”

Sam raises his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. I was here when we investigated it.” Haight runs a finger around the rim of his coffee cup in slow circles, frowning in recollection. “That would’ve been in sixty-seven or sixty-eight—not long after I’d passed my rites and been assigned here. There’d been rumors of ghosts at the Sise House for a decade or so, but all so nebulous that the warder at the time—Warder Coughlin, one of the finest men I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing—had quite reasonably dismissed them all out of hand.”

He pauses, and Sam says “Of course,” because Haight seems to expect agreement. “What changed his mind?”

“There was a seemingly credible witness. A young man a year or so returned from the Second Indochina War, a guest of the house, made repeated, detailed, and consistent reports of interactions with and sightings of the supposed ghosts. When the reports eventually reached Warder Coughlin’s ears, he decided it finally provided enough grounds for the chapter to a make a thorough inquiry.”

Haight falls silent again, eyes distant.

“So there was an investigation?” Sam asks before the silence can stretch too long.

Haight’s gaze snaps back into focus on Sam. “A team investigated, yes, to ascertain whether there was any truth to the matter. But there was none, of course. Just the vivid imaginings of a disturbed mind.”

“Of course,” Sam echoes. “Were you part of the team?”

Haight laughs again. “Oh no, no—I’d finished up my initiation by then and was buried in research. Something dreadfully important, I’m sure. At any rate, there was no need for me to prove myself at
that point. We had—and still have—operatives on retainer to do the legwork as needed.” He gives Sam a vaguely paternal smile, folding his hands over his slight paunch. “Our work is to record any incidents deemed noteworthy and provide guidance as seems fit. Barring emergency, once accepted as a full member, you will never need to set foot in the field ever again.”

"Oh, of course," Sam says again, and hides the bitterness better, this time. He smiles, and places his coffee cup on its saucer, with a clink. "That's just what I expected."

Haight asks about his preferences for study, then—history, Sam answers semi-honestly, and psychology, which leads Haight into telling him about some treatise one of his initiates had written a dozen years ago on the behavior of the female werewolf during colonial expansion. Before the small talk can get excruciating, Sam starts to make his excuses.

“Midterms coming up,” he says, with an apologetic smile, folding his napkin beside his half-cleared plate.

Haight nods. “I’m sure it’ll go swimmingly,” he says, and Sam’s sure that for Jenn they will, but before he can think of a response Haight knocks on the table, sharply. “Ah, I almost forgot. James! Bring the package for Mr. Winchester, please.”

Sam pauses, half-braced against the table. “I—didn’t expect a package, sir,” he says, cautious, and Haight waves a hand at him, keeping him in his seat. James enters a few seconds later with a binder-sized box, sealed and nondescript in brown paper. “What’s this?”

“That’s for you to find out, I believe,” Haight says. He taps the address once James sets it on the table between them and Sam recognizes the post office box number in their dad’s neat copperplate handwriting, with a lurch in his stomach. “It was meant to be sent to the bunker, but your father didn’t leave the clearest instructions. I know you’ll be surprised.”

Sam forces a smile. “Shocked.”

“At any rate, there it is. You can forward it along to your brother, if necessary.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Sam says, and at Haight’s nod he stands, and folds the package under his arm. It’s not that heavy, and though he’s intensely curious he has to keep it together. “Thank you, sir.”

Haight nods at James, and Sam’s dismissed. James precedes him to the apartment door, opens it for him, but before he can walk out Haight says, “Sam.” He swallows, but turns, his blandest polite expression in place.

One corner of his mouth turned up, Haight leans comfortably back in his chair. At the head of the table, surrounded by richness, he looks like a king. “When you graduate, if you’d like, you may pursue your initiation here. You’re obviously bright. I think you could accomplish great things, with your legacy.”

Sam takes a deep breath. “I appreciate that, sir,” he says, after a moment. A legacy—indolence, wealth. Stasis. "I'll think about it."

Haight lifts his coffee cup in a little toast, and Sam turns away, steps through the door and out from under the weight of the magic, before he can say anything else.

He follows James down the stairs to the front door. His hand is making the edge of the package damp, where he’s holding the box too hard; his other hand trails along the mahogany balustrade, fingertips glancing over the bas-relief of angels and demons at war carved intricately into its side. The chandelier hanging in the center of the foyer is filling the room with clear cool light and he takes
a last look at all the antique affluence around—but James pauses, one hand on the door, turning to look back at Sam before he opens it.

“On behalf of the chapterhouse, please allow me to apologize for the delay in delivering the parcel,” James says, utterly formal. “Warder Winchester left it with young Mr. Cartwright to give to me to have it posted, but Mr. Cartwright is—working on his memory skills.”

There’s a long pause. “Um, apology accepted,” Sam says, eventually, as it becomes clear that James is waiting motionless for his reply. “And I have it now, so no harm done.”

No harm except Dean stranded without a word from their father, working himself into a panic. He can’t break trust with Dean and lay into James about that, unfortunately, so instead he nods politely as he exits. The cold air hits his face like a shock as he walks back down the steps and the door closes solidly behind him, hopefully for the last time. He forces himself to continue at a calm pace until he’s back inside the car, where he has a semblance of protection against curious eyes.

The package really isn’t much bigger than a standard three-ring binder. He tears off the brown paper and tosses it over onto the passenger side of the seat and—it’s a cardboard box, plain, but a plain envelope’s stuck to it. He tears it off, tears it open, and inside there’s a single sheet of thick, cream-colored paper, an Aquarian star embossed in the center, and there’s Dad’s neat handwriting, again:

Dean, it reads. I’ve picked up a lead. It will be dangerous, but it is necessary for the work I’ve been doing. This package contains all the information you will need to continue, if I don’t succeed. Do not open this unless you receive confirmation of my death. If that happens, you know what you have to do.

It’s signed with a terse JW, along with a shape that Sam’s pretty sure is the Phoenician aleph, though who knows why.

Sam stares at the letter, for a minute. He knew he was leaving—knew he was going to disappear, for god knows how long, and he couldn’t pick up the damn phone. Sam doesn’t crumple the letter, though it’s tempting. He stuffs it back in its envelope, his throat tight, and turns to the box. No obvious warding on it, no magic sealing it tight—just plain packing tape, and Sam doesn’t really think about it. He flips the keys in his hand and uses one as a makeshift boxcutter, slicing the damn thing open in a quick move, because he wants to see what was so important that John Winchester would bother sending it along to his son.

Cardboard flaps peeled back—something wrapped in more brown paper. He pulls that away, and—and it’s Dad’s journal. It’s Dad’s journal, and Sam just stares at the box in his lap, shocked into stillness. Whenever their dad bothered to come home, when Sam was little, all he got was, that’s Dad’s, don’t touch it, from Dean—and it was serious, a rule, harder and stronger than practicing Latin declensions and recognizing the signs of a banshee roosting. Sam touches the black leather of the cover, made soft with the years. He’d asked, once, what their dad was always writing, and Dean had shaken his head, steered Sam away into a game of find-the-ghost. Don’t worry about it, Sammy, he’d been told, and he hadn’t, but now—

He lifts the journal out of its box. It’s thick, ruffled with tucked-in newspaper clippings, post-its and random notes jutting out between the pages. A glance out the driver’s window proves that no one’s watching—and of course, of course they aren’t, but he still feels like he’s under surveillance as he props the spine of the thing against the steering wheel and finally folds the cover back.

Embossed inside the front cover: J. WINCHESTER, in thick raised letters. The first page is in an unfamiliar hand. To John, it says, in a wide looping cursive. Aspicio praeteritum, tueor futurum. Sam traces a finger over the words, wondering, and then flips to the first few pages.
It starts, *Today I am a Man*. January 4, 1973. This is really it. This is their dad, starting out as an initiate. Sam flicks through the pages. Brief details of research, lists of omens and monsters, articles taped in with notes spidering off the newsprint, all laid out neatly in their dad’s well-practiced hand. Drawings, of shadows and monsters, going on and on through the years, and he flips to the end to find another little list addressed to Dean—instructions on where to go, who to talk to, how to continue the work, with no indication as to what the work actually is. Impersonal and businesslike and just like a Warder, giving orders to a subordinate without giving too much away.

The man’s spent so much time hiding his research into whatever killed Mom that he can’t even talk about it here, not outside of code, even though his son’s the only one likely to read it. There’s no real letter. Nothing personal if he actually does die—and how on earth would Dean ever hear about that? It’s not like Dad ever carries his real ID when he’s out on a "research trip." How long would it take, once he actually bit it, for the Letters to hear about it, and then for someone to think to call Dean? How long would Dean have waited to open the damn journal, if he’d actually gotten this stupid package—and how like Dad that is, not to pick up the phone and just call, just talk to his kid like a normal person.

Sam slams the journal closed, throws it onto the bench seat beside him. Screw it. Screw him. His all-important research into Mom’s death, so important he wouldn’t just let them help—keeping secrets, keeping everything to himself, as always, and then just assuming that Dean would pick it up where he left off. Well, Mom’s dead, and she’s not coming back. There are people who are dying now who need help, and Dad and the Letters can sit around and catalog the supernatural, can stay locked in the library thinking great thoughts, but right now Sam is going to actually do something.

He shoves the Impala’s door open with a shriek of hinges and grabs all evidence of the package up with him. The journal and its stupid fucking letter are buried in his duffel, in the trunk. He slams it closed and locks the car back up and throws the empty box with its wrapping into the trashcan on the corner, and then he stuffs his hands into his hoodie pockets and strides off down the street, following the route Dean had set off on less than an hour ago.

It’s still cold, though the fog has dissipated a little with the wind that’s whipping in off the Atlantic. He keeps his head down, paying just enough attention to the sidewalk that he doesn’t trip over something, but his gut’s tight with resentment, his hands clenched into fists in his pockets. Year after year, growing up cramped and discontented down in the dark, he’d asked—why don’t we go to school like the kids on TV, Dean? Why don’t we have a mom? Why aren’t we ever allowed to go anywhere? Why, why, why. Dean had deflected, pacified, told him that they were legacies, that this was the duty they owed their dad, and his dad before him, and that it was amazing—their dad was like a wizard, from the stories, and they were gonna grow up to be just like him. Dean sticking up for their dad, even when he was gone all the time—even if, a lot of the time, he barely counted as a father. Just someone who’d show up and make sure they had grocery money, who’d make sure they were studying, make sure they were filling the mold he expected them to fit into.

Sam moves neatly around a woman walking her fat little dog, doesn’t look up from the sidewalk. The thing was, Dean fit. Sam didn’t. Sam never did. He learned what he had to—he memorized basic spells and sigils, he read the histories of monsters and ghosts and demons and angels, he drilled the Rituale Romanum until he could rattle it off in his dreams—but. It wasn’t fair. Their dad would be gone for days and weeks at a time. When he and Dean were done with their studying for the day Sam would watch their three channels on the ancient crackling TV, he’d read books Dean brought back from Lebanon’s little library, and he’d see other worlds. Worlds with—mountains, with normal houses, people with regular jobs and wants, who did things, who didn’t just study and interpret and translate with no goal, no purpose, no end in sight. People with fathers who weren’t some awful combination of headmaster and drill sergeant. People with families who meant something more than a legacy.
Haight had been so sure. So certain that Sam would want to follow in the footsteps of his fathers. Sam drags a hand through his hair, turns the corner to the street the inn’s supposed to be on. The chapterhouse had been so still, so hushed. So separate from the world—a damned porter making sure it would stay separate, in fact. What he remembers from being little is just endless, unchanged, only Dean’s presence making the inflexible stasis of the bunker at all bearable. It was like being suffocated, a perfectly safe concrete cage.

He’ll give the journal to Dean, when this is done, if he has to. But he’s going to read it first. He wants to know exactly what happened, wants to decipher Dad’s code and see how exactly their lives got ruined. He has to see whether all of this was worth it.

Growing up the way they did, Sam had never so much as seen a cop car in real life until he’d gotten away. He’d become used to them after being on the road, after seeing a little more of the world than cornfields and a washed-up, backwater town, but he still comes to an abrupt halt when he turns the last corner to get to the inn and finds the street awash in flashing lights and men in uniform.

There’s a spill of bystanders across the sidewalk and into the road, pushed just barely back from the cop cars and ambulance, from the fire truck that’s blocking Sam’s path. The sparse mid-morning traffic’s totally jammed, not that most of the drivers are doing anything but gawking. Sam wends between the few stopped cars, craning his neck to see into the crowd—and there’s Dean, standing at the back of the milling group with his coat collar pulled up high, his arms folded over his chest. It only takes a second before he meets Sam’s eyes—and then he’s moving, peeling away from the crowd to head straight for Sam, moving fast and jerky like he’s only just restraining himself from running.

They meet in the middle, and Sam says, “What the hell happened?” but now that he’s close he sees that Dean’s eyes are wide and shocked, his face bone-pale, and Dean grabs him once he’s close enough, his fingers biting hard into Sam’s forearm. He’s just as freaked as he was earlier this morning, distressed and brittle in Sam’s kitchen, and then he’s dragging Sam away from whatever crime scene is going on at the Sise Inn. Sam lets him do it, moves up close so it doesn’t look weird to anyone who might turn their way, and before he knows it Dean has dragged him around to the other side of the Baptist church next door.

“What—” Sam starts, again, but Dean pulls him a little further back, out of sight of the inn completely, and blurts out, “There’s another body.”

The story comes out low and fast and almost monotone. He went into the Inn, like they’d agreed, and introduced himself as Agent Darrin to the hotel manager—who was confused but willing to work with the FBI, of course he was. Questions asked, answered with bewilderment—why, yes, sometimes it was cold in the inn, but it was an old building, after all. Oh, very famous for the hauntings, of course. Would the agent like a tour—no, thank you, but any history of trouble, of violent death—there had been trouble, certainly, but just tragic accidents, the manager assured.

“I was trying to figure out how to ask about the old woman,” Dean says, shoulders hunched in tight against the cold. “But then there was—this girl started screaming.”

Sam leans back against the bricks of the church, running a hand through his hair. The maid, it turned out. She half-fell down the stairs, incoherent, and the manager ran up and Dean followed, of course, and—

“Room 204.” Dean swallows, hard, and glances at Sam. “Same room the first guy was found in, and the old woman who had a heart attack.”
Sam wraps his arms around himself. “Who was it this time?”

Dean shrugs, briefly, his hands tucked into his pockets. “Contractor there for the remodel, the manager said. I didn’t—I couldn’t ask much, he was too freaked out, trying to talk and take care of the maid and call the police all at the same time.”

More pedestrians are trickling along the sidewalk past them, joining the crowd outside the inn and paying them no attention. Sam drums his fingers on his bicep, thinking.

“Sammy,” Dean says, after a moment. He’s looking down at the dead grass, frowning. “He was—it was the same.” He clears his throat. “Blood all over. He’d clawed his eyes out. Same as the other guy.”

“You saw?” Sam says. He hadn’t thought—

Dean looks up at him, mouth set, that dimple appearing briefly in his cheek as it does whenever he’s frustrated. “Yeah,” he says, shortly. He blows out a long breath, looking up at the greyish cloudy sky for a moment. “It was… bad.”

Sam bites his lip. He has no idea what to say to that, but he opens his mouth anyway—and then there’s the brief loud whoop of a siren flipping on and off. The ambulance moves slowly along the street past the church. He watches it go. It’s worse, somehow, when they’re not in a hurry.

“What did the warder say?” Dean asks, after a few seconds.

“He said there’s nothing here.” Sam looks back and Dean’s watching his face. He shrugs. “Said they cleared the inn and that there’s nothing worth looking into, at least not yet.”

He’d kept his voice calm, keeping the bitterness out of it, but Dean’s mouth twists. “Yeah,” he says. He shakes his head. “You were right, Sammy. It’s speeding up, whatever it is.”

He sounds—Sam stands up straight, not quite sure what he’s hearing. “So—?"

“Yeah,” Dean says again, and sighs, but then sets his jaw. He meets Sam’s eyes again and he smiles, briefly, without humor. “You’re right. We’ve got to do something.”

The Portsmouth public library is as familiarly beige and impersonal as most of the others Sam used on his trip around the country. Midmorning on a Monday, the place is silent, no one in the lobby or at the study tables, so Sam bypasses the empty reference desk and heads straight for the little bank of computers. They’re new, which is a nice surprise—matches the reek of new paint, the surprisingly unstained institutional carpet underfoot.

“Wow,” Dean says, quiet behind his shoulder. Sam hums a question, typing in the familiar queries for real estate history, local legends, periodicals. “These computers are—oh, that’s really fast.”

Sam glances back. Dean’s looking at the library’s user interface, their relatively quick processing and search times, with undisguised avarice—comparing them no doubt with the dinosaur of a computer their dad deigned to buy, back when the internet proved that it wasn’t just a fad. “Yeah, they’ve gotten a lot quicker than old Betsy,” Sam says, and starts clicking through the results, scanning as fast as he can. “Hey—awesome, look at this. They’ve got copies of a lot of this stuff already, let’s see what we can get.”

A few rings of the bell at the circulation desk unearths a frowsy, cardiganed lady, who seems frankly
shocked to see them, though she’s pleasant enough when Sam asks for any information related to the Sise family and their ancestral house. They’re ushered into the little special collections room to wait. Sam drums his fingers on the study table, thinking of all the things they’ll have to check, and finds himself staring at the shelf nearest him, at its elderly, leather-bound sets of books. “History of Portsmouth,” he reads aloud, and pulls out the fat volume one of the set nearest him. “Well, that’s one place to start.”

He turns to the end, but—ugh, of course. Old book, terrible index. “I don’t know why so many of these places can’t get an index inserted,” he says, flicking through the pages to try to find chapter headings. “It wouldn’t be that hard, and then they’d actually be usable.”

Dean lets out a quiet huff of a laugh. When Sam looks up, Dean’s smiling, kind of—he’s standing on the other side of the study table with his arms folded, his coat collar still tugged up high on his neck, and he looks as uncomfortable as a Man of Letters can be in a library, but he’s still looking at Sam with his eyes soft, a little curve to his mouth.

“What?” Sam says, pausing with his fingers stuck in the pages.

“Nothing,” Dean says, and then he shrugs. “Just—looks like some of the stuff I taught you stuck, that’s all.” He nods at the book in Sam’s hand. “From all the crap you said to Dad when you left, I expected you to break into hives as soon as you picked up a book, much less at the idea of coming into a library.”

Dean’s still got that sort-of smile on, and so Sam says, “Ha,” dry, but—he looks down, puts the book down on the table. “I used libraries all the time, when I was on my roadtrip. That’s how I emailed you, remember.”

But that’s—that’s not it, and Dean just shrugs again, still looking at Sam all fond and proud, and Sam clears his throat, looks down again like he’s actually reading the pages he’s got spread out before him. “Actually,” he starts, and then he has to swallow. It’s been too long, all these little lies of omission racking up, and if he doesn’t want to be a hypocrite when he thinks about their dad he has to say it, now, with Dean standing in front of him. “Actually, I took on a few hunts, back before I got to Boston.”

Dean says, “Oh.” There’s a pause. “You never told me that.” Low, but a little questioning tilt, like maybe Sam had and somehow Dean had forgotten, and Sam closes his eyes.

“No,” Sam starts, but—what is there to say, other than that. He was out, he was in the real world and he had all this knowledge that had been crammed into him against his will, and he’d railed so long against the Letters’ inaction that when he’d been sitting in that diner in Idaho Falls and he’d seen the obvious signs of a ghost’s interference in some article in the paper—what was he supposed to do? What was the point of running, if it wasn’t toward something?

“You weren’t”—Dean hesitates. Sam looks up to find him biting his lip, his frown deep. “You didn’t—not alone. Right, Sammy? You know what happens to hunters who work alone.”

Sam closes the History, leans against the table with both his hands flat on the wide leather cover. “I’ve got someone with me now,” he says, with an attempt at a grin, and Dean turns completely around, puts his back to Sam with his head bowed low, and the grin falls right off of Sam’s face.

“Look,” he starts, but Dean stands right where he is, doesn’t turn around. Sam scrubs a hand through his hair. “I know, I know it’s dangerous. I know that. But I—there’s so much out there, so many things that need to be taken care of, Dean. It’s not enough to just make a phone call, or hope that a hunter might notice, or that a Warder will take care of it.” Dean’s shaking his head, now, and Sam
throws up his hands, not that Dean will see it. “I mean, what are we doing here? You agreed, we’ve
got to take care of this. How is this different?”

Dean does actually turn around, at that, and his hands are shoved into his coat pockets, his
expression unreadable, and Sam opens his mouth to say—something, just to get that look off Dean’s
face, but then the door’s pushed open and the librarian backs into the room, pulling a loaded cart.

“Here you are!” she says, cheerful. “Pulled all the Sise information I could find, so I hope the paper
you boys are working on is supposed to be real long.”

“Thanks,” Sam says, eyes on Dean while she bustles out.

Dean looks down at the pile of archive boxes, file folders bristling out of the top, and he says,
“Guess we’ve got some reading to do,” voice low and even, and Sam sighs, but it’s not like it’s not
true. They settle in their separate chairs, the table a solid oak barrier between them, and slowly they
begin to bury themselves in records of people and events long gone and done.

There’s a lot of history in Portsmouth. Even confined to the one family, there are folders upon folders
of articles, notices, birth announcements and weddings and deaths. A town as small as this, it’s
almost harder than in a big city—all these sleepy little lives made large in the town paper. It’s
interesting, in its way, but it makes it harder to separate the charming from the meaningful.

Sam’s mouth and nose and eyes gradually go dry from the climate control; he catches a few paper
cuts across his right thumb; his back and shoulders start to cramp from how he’s hunched over his
slowly shifting stacks of articles. It’s quiet enough that he can hear the hand on his watch ticking
over, the sound of Dean turning pages loud in the still room, and he’s trying his damnedest to ignore
both, but it’s a struggle.

He’s gotten nowhere and his eyes are aching by the time someone’s stomach growls. It turns out
they’ve been in here for four hours, so he says, “Lunch?”

Dean doesn’t respond. Sam gets up—can’t suppress a groan when all of his cramped muscles protest
—to see what he’s so focused on, assuming that Dean’s not just ignoring him. “Find something
good?” he tries instead, coming around and leaning over Dean’s shoulder to see.

Dean startles back against him as though he’d forgotten he wasn’t alone, his shoulder brushing Sam’s
chest. “Maybe,” he says, a moment later. He flips back to the beginning of what looks like an article
cut from a glossy magazine—Sam would’ve automatically discounted it as a puff piece, from the
looks of it, but Dean seems to think it’s something.

“You want to make a copy of that?” Sam asks. “I’ll go ask the librarian if we can leave everything
here while we grab some lunch, and we can keep working while we eat.” For a moment it looks like
Dean’s going to balk, but then he sort of tucks himself in around his find and nods, not looking up.

“But it better be real food this time,” he says, with a shadow of humor, and Sam grins.

“But the best she can offer Sam is a Friendly's, which is at least better than going back to McDonald's;
this time Dean manages to successfully fake familiarity with the arcane rite of ordering off a menu,
though he just repeats Sam's order of grilled cheese and tomato soup.

Sam’s got print-outs on the inn from a couple 'haunted house' sites, but he's barely had the chance to
start making notes on the last one when he has to shove it aside so the waitress can get their plates onto the table. The soup has a weird aftertaste, and the sandwich is a lot less crisp and not nearly as hot as he’d hoped—but it’s edible, and filling, and easy to eat while he keeps reading the last poorly written account of ghostly activity at the inn, and it’s not until he’s licking the last grease from the sandwich off his thumb that he finishes the last pseudo-article, and looks up.

Dean’s tapping a pen on his stack of copies, reading with that intensely concentrated expression Sam remembers from so many projects Dean did on their dad’s behalf. The fool’s still not eating.

“Come on, man,” Sam says, and nudges Dean’s foot with his own. “How are you going to dig if you don’t eat?”

Dean startles again at the contact, eyes flying up to meet Sam’s, and then he frowns down at his sandwich where it’s congealing on the plate. “Here,” Sam says, and reaches across to confiscate what Dean’s been reading. “Let me take a look at that while you eat, and then we can compare notes.”

There’s a flash of some emotion Sam can’t identify, but then Dean says, “Fine,” short. The look’s gone almost before Sam can register it was there in the first place.

While Dean grimly makes his way through his now-cold lunch, Sam skims over the article—and finds himself actually engrossed in the story of this woman’s drive to help mental patients seeking to rejoin the rest of society. She’d bought the old Sise family home and revamped it, created a safe harbor for the people she’d hoped to serve despite opposition from all sides—zoning, neighbors, the patients’ own families. It’s a great piece of history, but nothing that seems applicable to their case until the very end, when the interviewer asked her about any regrets she had.

Sam reads: “Just one, really,” she says. “Our famous failure, Laurence Grenz. Such a tragedy. Even with all the guests we hosted at the house, I wish we could have helped him more.” When I asked for further details, she shook her head and smiled. “Out of respect for the family I won’t say any more. It’s a sad story, but—I hope Laurence doesn’t think too badly of us, wherever he is now.”

Sam looks up to find Dean watching him, his napkin balled up and covering his half-eaten lunch. “Worth a look, don’t you think?” Dean says, and Sam stands up too fast, his chair scooting back over the cheap linoleum with a screech.

* The librarian—Marjorie, it turns out—is unfazed by Sam’s request for her to look Grenz up in the database of obituaries. Sam waits, tapping his fingers on the wooden counter while Dean stands just behind, and then she comes back with a spool of microfilm: “December 1967,” Marjorie says, with a smile, and then it’s finding the microfiche machines in their weird corner of the stacks, settling into the creaky chairs in front of them—and remembering, again, that Dean’s never had to deal with these, has he. Endless scrolling through the spotty, elderly scans of cramped newsprint, squinting at the yellowed screen until, finally, the obituary: Laurence Grenz, beloved son. Cause of death unspecified, flowers may be sent to—but the exact date gives them another week or two to look through, and then it’s back to Marjorie for more microfilm, and then it’s showing Dean how to use the machine, and then it’s scrolling, again, in the Herald and the Hampton Union and the New Hampshire Gazette, scanning for any mention of Grenz or the inn, sitting hunched over and side-by-side while the afternoon grinds away, the light coming in through the small windows overhead getting greyer and greyer.

It’s almost five o’clock and there’s a headache pulsing behind Sam’s right eye before Dean says, “Got it,” the abruptness of his voice making Sam jump.
“You sure?” Sam says, leaning over so he can see the screen.

Dean nods, taps at the article he’s zoomed in on, and lets Sam jostle into his space to read it.

_Tragic accident_, it says, and Sam reads about a Vietnam veteran, disturbed and aching and trying anything to get away from the flashbacks, self-medicating, fragile, brought to the Sise House to get him back on his feet—but there were the ghost stories, the old silly folktales that got passed down in a town like this, in old buildings and old families, and when they were passed to Laurence he clutched them close. Something to focus on, to love. Then there was hurting himself to prove it, and hurting some of the other inmates, trying anything to convince people of what he saw, of the truth of spirits that could haunt a person, that could hold their hand in the dark when the nightmares got to be too much—and then the threat of the move to an asylum—and then the suicide, bloody and violent.

“He clawed his own eyes out,” Sam reads, under his breath.

“This has got to be the guy the Warder told you about,” Dean says, and Sam pulls back from the machine to find Dean looking right at him, all traces of his earlier irritation wiped away. “The other ghosts really weren’t real, he just believed that they were—and once he believed it strong enough, once he was certain that they were his—his friends, or whatever, then he killed himself so he could stay with them.”

Sam sits back in the creaky little chair, thinking. “Makes sense, I guess,” he says. “But why now? There haven’t been incidents for years—we couldn’t find anything that out of the ordinary in the history of the house.”

Dean taps the grainy, black-and-white picture of the house in the scanned-in article. “Remodeling, Sammy,” he says, like it’s obvious. Sam frowns, and Dean sighs. “Room 204. When I went up there, the dead guy was working on the remodel of the upper floor. They’re going to change Grenz’s room—the room where he fell in love with the ghosts, where he lives. If you were an insane spirit who wants nothing more than to stay with your imaginary friends, in the place where you think you met them, what would you do?”

It fits. Sam runs his knuckles over the stubble coming in sharp on his jaw. “We still don’t know why the other two got killed, though.”

Dean pauses, but then shrugs. “If I were writing a treatise on the Sise Inn that would be a problem,” he says, his eyes sharp on Sam. “But this is a hunt, and we’ve figured out a motive and a method, and from what I understand hunters don’t seem to need much else, right?”

Low blow, and Sam sucks in a breath to respond—and then shakes his head, letting it go. He’s not going to convince Dean otherwise, not by arguing, not right now.

A trip back to the bank of computers reveals that Grenz’s grave isn’t famous or loved enough that someone has bothered to mark it on Sam’s go-to site, and he drums his fingers on the keyboard for a second, thinking. “This would be the time to start… wandering around graveyards, right?” Dean says, a little wryly, and then Sam catches Marjorie watching them out of the corner of his eye.

“For our paper,” he says, leaning on the counter and giving a smile that will make his dimples pop. “We’re supposed to get some information on the whole ‘ghost’ thing, and we were thinking it’d be great if we could get some pictures of famous gravestones associated with—”

Marjorie’s nodding even before he finishes, smiling right back at him while she comes around the counter and leads them directly to the special collections room where they’d left all their research spread out before. “You boys are so thorough,” she says, with a weird affection in her voice—and
brings them to a set of old wooden filing cabinets. She pats the nearest one, beaming at Sam. “Grave site index. Any grave in Portsmouth can be found right here.”

She bustles out again when someone rings the bell at the desk, and Sam finds himself smiling genuinely after her. “You know, if every town were this organized, every hunt would take like half an hour,” he says, and Dean huffs a little laugh.

“Three cheers for librarians,” Dean says, dry, and hauls open the first file drawer.

It gets dark early, this time of year, but Halloween means the streets are crowded even as the sun’s going down. Sam huddles into his hoodie, arms folded over his chest, and wishes that they had a blanket or something to lay down on the Impala’s trunk—because it is freezing.

“Well, not exactly the ideal grave-digging hour, and so they’ve got yet more time to kill. A little group of trick-or-treaters passes by them on the sidewalk, herded by their parents, and one little boy dressed as Spiderman peels off and prods Dean familiarly in the knee with his pumpkin bucket, saying, “Trick-or-treat!” in a piping voice.

He’s so earnest, blinking up at Dean with his little mask shoved up on top of his head, and Sam gets a weird pang in his gut. “Sorry,” Dean says, after a second. “We don’t have any candy, Spiderman.”

“Oh,” the boy says, frowning, and then his dad turns and—”Skylar! Sorry, sorry, he doesn’t really get it yet,” the dad says, collecting his son by the hand and pulling him back to the rest of the milling children. “Buddy, we knock on doors at houses, we don’t just ask random people, okay—”

Sam watches them go down the street, the kids all tumbling up the steps to a big old house on the other side of the cemetery. There’s a chorus of screeches, trick-or-treat, warm light spilling out onto the shadowy porch. He pulls his heels up onto the bumper so he can lean his elbows on his knees, and rubs at his temples. He really wishes he had a beer.

It came out maybe a little sharper than it should have, and he shakes his head—at himself, at Dean, doesn’t matter. Answering Haight’s questions with careful lies was a lot easier than this.
After a while, Dean clears his throat. “Does Jenn know?”

That makes Sam turn his head. Dean’s wearing another expression he can’t really read, and he doesn’t know when that happened. Used to be he knew everything about his brother. Dean’s just watching him, though, a barely-there frown puckering his eyebrows. “Does Jenn know what?” Sam says, finally.

Dean shifts his weight. “Well, the hunting, for a start,” he says, with a tight shrug. “And about—did you tell her about the Men of Letters?”

Sam twists around fully, one foot hitting the damp asphalt. It’s a weird shock in his belly, Dean saying it right out in the open like that, when anyone could walk by. “What? Of course not.”

Dean’s expression doesn’t change, though, and he hunches up a little, shoulders high and tense. “When you left, you told Dad—”

Sam’s shaking his head, again, and he says, “Dean,” but Dean just talks right over the top of him, says, “You told Dad that you’d talk if we ever tried to pull you back, and I didn’t know if you’d already told about us, since—”

“No,” Sam says, loud, and he finds himself standing, towering over Dean where he’s leaning against the car. Dean stops talking but he’s still looking at Sam like he’s a stranger. “I wouldn’t, Dean. And I’d never tell Jenn. As far as she knows, I just have a bad relationship with my dad, and I haven’t talked to my family in a while. Lots of people can say the same. She thinks we’re just… normal.”

Dean’s eyebrows go high and he purses his lips for a second. “Huh,” he says, with a nod. He looks over at the tall cemetery fence, his profile lit up by the streetlight. “So. Hunting counts as normal, now?”

There’s a bitter twist to his tone. Sam folds his arms over his chest. “No, of course not,” he says. He doesn’t know what to do with Dean, like this.

“No,” Dean echoes. He shifts his weight again, slouches down further on the trunk. When he looks back up at Sam he doesn’t look angry, or bitter. He presses his lips together for a second, corners of his mouth turned down, and then shrugs, again. “If you just went out one night to hunt and never came back, she’d never know what happened.”

The sentence sits there between them for a long moment. Sam holds Dean’s eyes and has no idea what to say, and after the moment passes Dean drops his head, folds his hands together between his knees. Sam watches the way he twists his rings, one after the other—a gesture that’s familiar, at last, from year after year of sitting and watching Dean take calls from their dad in the war room, from watching him read grimoires, from when Dean would sit to the side of Sam and their dad’s arguments, nervous and waiting to step in—and Sam sighs, feeling suddenly very tired. His head hurts.

“I only went on a few hunts,” he says. Another family walks past them, a mom and two kids, and he offers them a fake smile when the mom waves. Dean’s still twisting the platinum ring on his left hand. “A few ghosts, a ghoul once. Maybe six or seven cases.” It was more than a dozen, but this is more truth than he’s told in years and he’s doing what he can, here. “Nothing happened, other than a twisted ankle once, a bunch of bruises, and some blisters digging up graves. When I got to Boston I stopped, and I haven’t been since. She never has to know.”

Sam’s telling the truth—at last, after years, and he doesn’t know how else to sell it, how to make Dean believe him. Dean looks up at him, and searches his face. “Okay,” he says. He bites his lower
lip and takes in a breath, but then he just looks down and away, shaking his head, and he says, “Okay,” again, low, like Sam’s not meant to hear it.

Sam sits back down on the trunk, the cold metal seeping right back through his thin jeans. That’s all he gets, apparently—Okay, his brother clearly unhappy but unwilling to argue, and if Sam didn’t have this headache, if he weren’t tired and cold and if it were any other situation, then he would’ve pressed, he would’ve demanded something more, but—as it is, no. He wraps his arms more tightly around himself, jaw clenched hard enough that his teeth are aching, and shivers there in the silence while the traffic on the streets gets lighter, families thinning out and heading back home as evening slips into night, the good decent people of this sleepy little town bundling themselves back into their homes, where it’s warm, and safe, and there’s nothing to worry about.

Finally, there’s a clang and an echo of hooting laughter that carries over the still, quiet cemetery—the teenagers they overheard jumping the fence earlier going home from whatever Halloween stupidity they’d been up to. Sam tilts his watch to catch the streetlight and, yeah, it’s almost ten thirty, and they’ve waited long enough. He stands up, crams his groan back where it belongs when his legs ache at so long sitting still in the cold, and jerks his head at Dean.

The moon is high and bright and the fog’s thick, white and nearly impenetrable at thirty paces. Aside from the temperature they’re not going to get much better conditions than this. Dean unlocks the trunk and Sam pulls out the gleaming new shovels they’d bought earlier at the hardware store. He slips the little bottle of lighter fluid into his pocket, grabs the giant plastic canister of salt, and then zips his hoodie as high as it’ll go, shivering. He really needs to get a new coat.

Dean slams the trunk closed after another minute, shoving something into his pockets, and Sam hands him the shovels and then they’re off, moving quietly down away from the streetlamp into the fog, and then there’s the bit of wall that Sam scoped out earlier where a brick crumbled away, making an easy foothold. It’s the work of a few seconds to haul himself up and over, to hold the shovels close and quiet while Dean drops down beside him, a dark shadow against the dark fence. Dean produces a small, ancient flashlight and holds it between his teeth while he orients himself with the blurry copy of the graveyard map they’d made with Marjorie’s help, and then it’s moving as silently as they can through the stones and statues, squinting for names in the moonlight, dead grass and leaves crunching under their feet.

Grenz’s headstone is right where the map said he’d be—northwest corner, near the family plot, full of elderly graves that obviously aren’t well-tended. Dean flicks on his little flashlight again and by its flickering beam brushes away enough dead moss so they can see the broken flower carved into the marble, the inch-high Beloved Son above the dates. Dean flicks a glance up at Sam and Sam nods, and then—well, there’s nothing for it but to dig.

It’s been a long, long time since Sam’s had to dig a grave. It’s surprisingly easy to fall back into the rhythm. He takes the end closer to the headstone and Dean starts five feet or so further along, facing the other way so they won’t jostle each other, and then it’s just the steady swing of it, crunching through the cold crust of earth, making the hole. The effort warms Sam up, at least. The last time was—Texas, wasn’t it, that April two years ago, when he’d run into that pool where three little kids had drowned and he’d had to burn the bones of the ten year-old who just wanted friends. Grim, but the hunt had been easy, and he’d dug up the little coffin on a warm spring night, his hands calloused enough that his stolen shovel hadn’t even raised a blister. His hands are killing him, now, too used to the espresso machine and tapping kegs, and yet—it’s good. They get far enough down that only one of them really fits and Sam nudges Dean but Dean just shakes his head, mutters “I’m fine,” and fine, if he wants to keep going that’s up to him, so Sam hops out of the hole and sits on the big headstone memorializing Grenz’s neighbor, rolling his sore, warm shoulders.
Dean’s keeping a steady pace, even though he’s never done this before. Sam rubs his hands lightly together, cautious of the newly forming blisters, watching his brother. He’s still got on their dad’s coat, still in a suit because that’s all he’s got—still wearing his tie, even. Sam finds himself smiling, a little, at the thought of what Haight would say, if he could see this. Two legacies, blistered hands and filth up to their knees, doing the dirty work in the cold and the dark, where no Man of Letters would deign to tread. A little wisp of freezing air blows by and Sam shivers as it catches where the sweat’s dampened his hair, the center of his back, but he’s in a pretty good mood, suddenly, and he just tucks his hands into his pockets and settles in to wait for his turn in the grave to come again.

They trade off twice after that, the shovel handles going slightly sticky from their torn-up hands—they’ll have to get some band-aids and bactine before they head home. Sam’s back in the hole and shoulder-deep when the wind starts to really kick up and the temperature drops so fast it hurts when he inhales. He jerks his head up but Dean’s already on his feet, his breath pluming in the moonlight and this is the bad part, this is the part that’s nothing like what they used to read about, and Sam says, “Dean—” and then Grenz is there, a silver-white shadow illuminated from within, and even the ghost of him bleeds from the holes where there used to be eyes.

Sam freezes, just for a second of shock—it’s always a shock, every time—but then Grenz sucks in a rattling breath that’s loud, so much louder than it should be, and swings his eyeless face Dean’s way, and that jolts Sam, he stabs the shovel into the dirt and goes to scramble out of the grave, but Dean’s already moving, ripping a hand out of his pocket and flinging salt that shreds the flimsy body until the ghost disappears with a thin high wail.

“Keep digging,” Dean says, breathing hard, and Sam blinks up at him. Dean glances down and all Sam can see is the gleam of his eyes, his teeth, no details or expression with Dean’s body blocking the moonlight, but Dean says, “Come on, keep going, I’ve got this,” and Sam grabs up his shovel and puts his back into it.

It’s cold, colder still now that there’s something dead in the air with them, and it hurts to breathe but that just becomes part of the rush—stab down, stomp the blade, heave dirt away, suck in ice-sharp air, over and over. Dean’s muttering something in one of the Gaelics, talking fast and low and not meant for Sam to hear, and he doesn’t know what it is but then there’s another bloom of white light off in his periphery and a shriek, and now Grenz knows what they’re doing, now he’s angry. Sam risks a glance as he shovels another pile of dirt over his shoulder and Dean’s got his fingers wrapped up in cloth and he flings a handful of salt and Grenz disappears, again, frustrated wail echoing through the graveyard, but Dean doesn’t stop talking and so Sam doesn’t stop digging. Stab, stomp, heave, inhale, and his lungs are burning, his hands are numb, and then the shovel scrapes sharp against metal and, that’s it, that’s the coffin lid.

Sam drops to his knees, shoves at the dirt with his hands to see—yeah, it’s metal, but please, let them be lucky—yes, it’s split lid, thank god, and he shoves himself backward on his knees in the dirt, finds the hinges and jams his shovel into the dirt on the opposite side while Grenz screams again, piercing, up above. Scrabbling with the shovel edge, putting his shoulder into it and heaving and Sam’s able to lever the lid open—something snaps, but it doesn’t matter, not right now, because there’s the body, old enough that the flesh has disappeared into nothing, just the skeleton and the frayed decaying remains of a funeral suit, and Sam tosses the shovel up over the lip of the grave and scrambles to follow it, heaves himself over the edge of the hole and kicks off the opposite side to roll himself free. Dean’s chanting louder, hoarse and fast and barely pausing for breath, and Sam drags the lighter fluid out of his pocket while he’s still on his back, leans over and squirts half the bottle directly into the hole. Grenz shrieks, so close and loud Sam’s certain that he’s right on top of them, but when he scrambles up to his knees Grenz is—he’s floating close, he’s right there, but there’s some sort of gauzy filmy light that’s keeping him contained, some force in the air that he’s scratching his long awful bloodied nails against, but he can’t get out, and Sam doesn’t know what’s going on but there’s
no time to lose. He fumbles in the dirt for the canister of salt, careful not to distract Dean from whatever spell he’s working—and winds up dumping in almost the whole thing, covering the bottom of the grave and the coffin lid and the skeleton in white. It takes him three tries to get the stupid cheap matches from the convenience store to strike and then the whole book’s on fire and he drops it in, right onto Grenz’s skull, and then there’s the immediate *whump* of light, and heat, fire racing through the dry fabric and dust of the coffin, and Dean stops talking with a gasp as Grenz’s ghostly face lights up in pain, and then a moment later he shrieks for the last time, and is gone.

He heaves himself to his feet, staggering away from the flaming grave. “Are you okay?” he says, and Dean’s swaying, slightly, turned away from the fire so that he’s haloed in red-orange light. Sam frowns, steps closer. “Dean?”

Dean shakes his head, frowning, and he’s drawn and absolutely white in the face but he shakes his head, again, when Sam gets close enough to touch him. “I’m fine,” he says, voice scratched-up and rough. He coughs, but he picks his head up, and then he grabs Sam by the arms, looks him up and down. “Sammy, are you alright?”

Sam nods, finds himself grinning. “Yeah, man, I’m fine—didn’t get scratch on me, I swear,” he says, but Dean hauls him into a hug anyway, pulls him down with a tight grip, and Sam lets him, because holy shit, he just went on a hunt, with his *brother*, the one person in the world he ever wanted to share this with, and he hugs Dean back, finds himself laughing into the fine dark wool of Dean’s coat.

“It’s not funny,” Dean says, muffled, and pushes him back, but he’s got a reluctant smile tugging at his mouth.

Sam shakes his head. “Seriously,” he says, squeezing Dean’s shoulders. “Easiest hunt I’ve ever been on. Wish I’d had you along in Texas. What was that?”

Dean shrugs, but the smile’s still playing over his face. “Variation on a circle of protection, from the Highland Scots,” he says, like it’s nothing, and reaches down to unwind the cloth from his hand—a scarlet ribbon, Sam sees now, in the firelight. “Didn’t know if it’d be useful or not, but figured it couldn’t hurt.”

He peels the last end of the ribbon off his hand with a wince and Sam takes his wrist, tilts his hand toward the light so he can see—Dean’s blisters have burst, the ribbon tacky with blood.

“Dean, I mean it,” Sam says, and Dean looks back up at him. “This would’ve been so much harder.”

He gets another shrug, but Dean’s smile tucks in, goes small and pleased before he ducks his head down, focuses on winding the ribbon back into a neat ball that he slips back into his pocket. “What now?” Dean says, and Sam blinks, remembering where they are—and this is the part that sucks.

“We’ve gotta get out of here,” he says, and Dean frowns at him but even as he says it they hear a siren pick up, way off in the distance but Sam knows it’s coming closer. Dean’s eyes go wide and Sam shrugs, grins. “Cops don’t appreciate our hard work.”

He grabs their shovels, and shoves the canister of salt into Dean’s hands, drops the bottle of lighter fluid into the fire so that it roars up higher, warmth washing over Sam like a wave, and then he leads Dean at a half-run out of the cemetery, dodging headstones by the firelight until they’re too far from the grave and they have to pick their way out by moonlight, again, knocking into each other and half-tripping over headstones three times until Sam has to muzzle his giggling into the sleeve of his hoodie, Dean shoving at his shoulder and whispering, “What’s wrong with you, shut up,” but there’s a shiver of laughter in his voice, too. It’s not until they’re up and over the wall, Sam catching the
shovels when Dean hands them down and then giving Dean a hand so he doesn’t fall over when he hits the pavement, that the fizz of hysteria in Sam’s chest dissipates. Drained, he leans against the Impala’s smooth, freezing flank, just catching his breath.

Dean stows the shovels in the trunk and closes it back up as quietly as he can. The siren’s close, but the actual cemetery gates are all the way on the other side, locked, and the cops won’t be in too much of a hurry—expecting those kids from earlier, probably some kind of Halloween prank, not a full-blown grave desecration.

“‘You look exhausted,’” he hears, and opens his eyes to find Dean watching him. Dean’s voice is still scream-hoarse and even in the distant glow from the streetlamp Sam can see the circles cutting deep under his eyes.

“You’re one to talk,” Sam says. He flexes his hands, lets the blisters pull against his tender skin, then rolls his head carefully, trying to stretch his shoulders without wincing.

Dean comes close, straight-backed despite the fight and their long day, the corner of his mouth curled up a little. He looks up at Sam, steady in a way he hasn’t been since he first showed up on Sam’s door. “Yeah, well, I’m older. Means I need less sleep.” Sam can’t help laughing at that, and there’s just enough light for him to pick out the sudden creases at the corners of Dean’s eyes—though he isn’t quite smiling, anymore. He reaches up and scrubs through Sam’s hair, like he used to when they were younger, makes Sam duck away on reflex even as he grins. “Come on, short stuff, get in the car,” and when he pushes Sam towards the passenger door Sam goes willingly because he’s—happy, and it’s familiar. Something he didn’t realize he was missing until now, now that he has it back.

Dean turns the car over and it purrs to life, and they ease slowly away from the curb, moving off down the deserted street into the night. Sam closes his eyes, but he’s not going to fall asleep. There’s a click and then the whir of the tape-deck, and then it’s that old tape again, with the sound on so low he can just barely hear it. He settles into the seat and listens to the rattle of the heating vents, the so-familiar rumble of the engine, and despite his aching shoulders and the sting of his hands it’s like the years fall away and he’s right back home, where he belongs. Dean starts to sing along, a soft whisper-voice murmuring the lyrics Sam’s heard a thousand times before, and Sam curls an arm under his head, hides a smile in the sleeve of his hoodie, while the air in the car grows warmer.

* * *

He hears, “Sammy,” and he comes awake all at once, blinking away the scorch-red behind his eyes and finding Dean shaking his shoulder, frowning and drawn in the streetlight glow.

“What, I’m awake, I’m awake,” he says, dragging a hand over his eyes. Goddamn, his shoulders hurt.

Dean leans one elbow on the steering wheel. “Need to tell me where to go from here,” he says, tilting his head at the road. They’re idling in a parking lot outside a lumber store and Sam sits up a bit more, cranes around.

Turns out they haven’t crossed the Mystic and Sam knuckles sleep out of his eyes, gives directions to the bridge, on how to navigate off the freeway and down into the little neighborhoods on Cambridge’s side of the river. Dean’s driving careful and too-slow and sticking to his lane, because Boston traffic’s waking up for rush hour and this is about as far from the dirt roads outside Lebanon as it’s possible to get. He manages, though, and they coast up into nearly the same parking spot he got—what, not much more than a day ago, less than half a block from their apartment building.

There are a lot of days Sam regrets their lease on the third floor and this is one of them, and his thighs
and back are screaming by the time he makes the landing, fumbling his keys out of his pocket and easing the door open. The lights are all off and he glances at his watch—not even six in the morning, yet, and because this is Tuesday Jenn’s probably still asleep, doesn’t have to get to class until nine o’clock.

They changed in a gas station bathroom just outside the Portsmouth city limits, didn’t want to make it easy to connect the burning grave with how filthy they looked in case they saw anyone, but Sam still feels grimy, dirt caked into his aching hands, in his hair. He drops his keys into the bowl on the table by the door. “Think I’m gonna shower,” he says, trying to keep quiet through a huge yawn. “I smell like a gym bag, Jenn’s gonna throw me out of bed.”

There’s a little huff behind him. “Yeah,” Dean says, quiet, and Sam turns around to find Dean hovering in the doorway, his coat collar pulled up high and his eyes wrecked with tiredness.

Sam shakes his head. “Come on, man,” he says, and catches Dean’s elbow, light, pulls him in and closes the door behind him. “Come in, you look like you’re gonna pass out.”

Dean goes with it, doesn’t even stiffen up, but he glances toward the closed bedroom door and his voice is soft when he says, “I shouldn’t, Sammy.” He rubs his fingers over his mouth, looks down at the floor. “I’ll go get your bag, bring it up for you, but—but I should go, I should start checking places around town. Dad’s still out there, we still haven’t figured out what happened.”

Sam sighs. He doesn’t want to have to talk about the journal, yet. “Look,” he says, and Dean does actually look up at him, then, in the dim of Sam’s living room, and he looks raw and unhappy and Sam’s too tired for this. “I know you want to keep looking for him, and I’ll help, I promise, but—god, I’m exhausted, Dean, and I know you’re worse off than me. Can’t do anything until you get at least a few hours of sleep, right?”

He’s not at his best—this isn’t close to the amount of whining he used to be able to slather on when he wanted something from Dean when he was little—but Dean softens, anyway, glances toward the couch. “I—yeah,” Dean says, and Sam shakes his shoulder, gently, says, “You can use the laptop, call some places in the morning. Hang out here for a while, okay?” and Dean nods, all of the tension draining out of him like water circling down a drain.

There’s a spare blanket in the closet for when one of their friends crashes here after a night of drinking, and Sam fetches it out for Dean, moving quiet through the apartment so they won’t wake Jenn. When he’s sure Dean won’t just bolt out the door as soon as Sam turns his back, he heads for the bathroom, eases the door to the bedroom closed so it’ll be as quiet as possible, and then turns the water on as hot as it’ll go, strips off the fresh change of clothes and stands under the water, letting the blast of heat hit him right in the back of the neck and erode the tension slowly away. It’s a while before he dredges up the energy to wash, to rinse out his hair, but the ache of weariness is still there, dragging at his eyes. He shuts off the water and dries off as best he can, wraps the towel around his hips and peaks out the door to the living room. Dean’s asleep. He’s taken off his shoes, lined them up neatly next to the couch, and he’s spread out on his side, Dad’s coat balled up under his head and the blanket tugged up over his shoulder, and he’s pale and too skinny and tense-looking even when he’s sleeping, but he’s there. Sam runs a hand through his wet hair, looking at his brother safe and close in the thin morning light, and there’s a weird feeling in his chest, like relief maybe, like something slotting into place, but he’s too tired to examine it. He slips back through the bathroom, turns off the lights before he opens the bedroom door, and there’s Jenn, curled up and sound asleep. He drops the towel to the floor and slips on the pajama pants he’d been wearing when Dean broke in, eases down onto the mattress behind her. She makes a soft, still-asleep sound, doesn’t stir. He soaks in the warmth of their bed, the smell of her, and then he turns over and presses his face into the pillow and thinks of nothing at all.
He’s overwarm and the room is bright, way too bright, when he wakes up. He stares into the tangle of sheets and blanket and has absolutely no idea where he is for a few seconds, and then he sits up fast, looks at the clock with a sick wrench of certainty that he’s going to be late, it’s quarter to noon and he’s gonna be fired—but then the world comes back to him. He scrambles his tender hands through his hair. He’s still got the day off and Jenn’s long-gone, away at class all day. Sam wishes she’d woken him up before she left, just so he could kiss her, if nothing else. He swings his legs over the side of the bed and the universe reassembles itself, slowly. Ah, god—his shoulders are a wreck. He stretches, carefully, groaning out loud when something pops in his back. His hands are hot-stiff, tender, and he wonders how Dean’s doing, and then—Dean.

He stumbles out of bed, pushes the bedroom door open, and—he’s still there. Sam leans against the doorjamb, unaccountably grateful. Dean’s rolled over onto his belly, spread out flat on the couch with the blanket twisted around him, and Sam wants to just let him sleep forever, but he knows he’s pushing his luck with just having him stay in the first place.

“Hey, Dean,” he says, quiet, and sits on the coffee table. No response, and he sets his knuckles against Dean’s shoulder, jostles him easy, and that gets him a low, protesting moan, and he can’t help but smile. Dean never was a morning person. “I know, I know, I’m the worst.”

“You are the worst,” Dean mumbles, a hoarse rasp into the pillow of his coat, but then he turns his head and Sam’s treated to his bedhead, a sleep-blurred green eye, lines creased sharp into his cheek above the line of his stubble. He squints at Sam, frowning, then says, “Time is it.”

“Noon, almost,” Sam says, and Dean’s eyes go wide, he shoves up onto his bandaged hands, but Sam’s shaking his head, already. “Dude, don’t freak out.”

“I never—” Dean coughs, clears his throat, and Sam takes advantage of the pause to push him back into the couch cushions. “I know. Up at seven, working at eight,” Sam says. Dean’s mouth goes tight and Sam sighs, but he smiles a little to take the sting out of it. “This isn’t the bunker, we don’t have to be on a schedule. We were up all night, taking out a ghost, remember?”

Dean stares at him, for a few seconds, and then digs the heel of his hand into his right eye. “Yeah, Sam, I remember,” he says, bone-dry.

“Yeah.” Sam nudges Dean’s knee with his own. “So, maybe cut yourself a little slack. We’re gonna look for Dad, we’ll start making calls and stuff, but first things first. I’m starving, and I’m guessing you could use a cup of coffee.” Dean nods, into his hand, and Sam grins. “I’ll make you one, but you’ve got to shower, first.”

Dean pops his head up, frowning, and then his face changes as he takes a deep breath. “Uh—yeah, good point,” he says, and Sam claps him on the shoulder, grabs him a clean towel. This is going to work.

It’s less than half an hour before Dean comes out of the bathroom again, damp and clean and looking relatively refreshed, even in clothes he slept in. He left his jacket on the couch and it’s a weird little blast from the past to see him in shirt-sleeves, no tie, padding out into the living room on socked feet, finger-combing his damp hair back from his forehead. Sam’s dressed and he got the coffee made, the last of the loaf of bread made into peanut butter sandwiches for breakfast—or lunch, now—and he’s
sitting there with Jenn’s laptop on his knees, the beginnings of research started, but really—he’s been thinking.

“You owe me coffee,” Dean says, buckling his watch into place. He tugs his shirt-cuff back over it, gives Sam expectant eyebrows over his less-dim eyes, and Sam smiles at him, nods at the counter where he’s left a cup next to their ancient Mr. Coffee. He watches Dean pour out a mugful, watches him cup both hands around the warmth of it and suck in caffeinated air, closing his eyes. It’s strange, having him here, still. His jacket may be off but he’s still buttoned-up, plain white shirt closed at his wrists and throat, tucked into his slacks, and it’s like two worlds colliding. Sam’s past and his present, smashed together as Dean takes a gulp of coffee, as he comes and sits next to Sam on the terrible cheap couch Sam and his girlfriend picked out together.

“So?” Dean says, voice a rough burr. Sam blinks at him, and Dean raises his eyebrows again. “Earth to Sammy.”

“Sorry,” Sam says, and straightens up. They’ve got work to do, and he promised, after all. “Okay, here’s what I think we should do.”

It’s an afternoon’s worth of work. It’s way more than that. Dean makes a sandwich disappear, sucks down a mug of coffee, and then they’re off. Sam gives him the Boston phone book—Dean boggles a little, seeing it so much bigger than the one they have for Smith County back home, and Sam grins at him long enough that Dean nudges him hard in the ribs—but then it’s finding the phone numbers, the names of the people to call. Hospital, police station. Morgue. They sit shoulder to shoulder, and Dean uses his false strong FBI voice, asking, *a man in his fifties, may answer to the name of John Winchester*, dialing the apartment’s cordless again and again. The battered atlas Sam used on his road trip spread out between them. Finding towns, spreading out from New Hampshire through southern Maine, through Vermont, down into Massachusetts, finding sleepy towns that might’ve harbored their wayward, infuriating father. Sam scribbles down numbers on the legal pad, hands it back to Dean with their elbows and hands jostling each other. It’s slow. The afternoon light slants golden across the bare wooden floor, the only sound the scritch of pen on paper, the muted beeps of the phone as Dean dials, again, the scratch of Dean’s hoarse voice as he asks, again, as he says *any information you might have*, as he says, *a caucasian male, dark hair*, as he says, *no, no, that’s all right, thank you very much for your time.* Slow, but Sam’s faster than Dean, has the easier job—just finding and regurgitating information, googling over and over, jotting down what he thinks Dean might be able to use. So much like when they were younger.

He sits back, eventually. Dean’s got another twenty numbers to call, and they’re about to work their way south through the atlas to Suffolk County, and still nothing. No word. Sam licks his lips in sympathy as Dean’s voice cracks, talking to some deputy in Salem. Nothing, and the journal’s still sitting hidden in Sam’s duffel, down in the Impala’s trunk. He could say something. He should. Say, *Dean, he wanted to go. Say, he disappeared, because that’s what he does.* Yet—a year and a half on the road taught Sam how many ways there are for things to go wrong. He always suspected that their dad hunted, that he was doing more than he let on, and he’s good, Sam knows it. All the damn gun training down in the range, the drilling on exorcisms and monster weaknesses, they’re hard to forget. Still. Dean’s right. He knows what happens to hunters who work alone. Something always gets them, in the end.

He bites his lips between his teeth and pulls up his old email, again, sitting back far enough that Dean can’t see what’s on the laptop screen. While Dean talks to a morgue attendant in Marblehead Sam rereads the emails. The proof’s there between the lines. Dean asking about Sam, asking about the world he’d never expected to see, because he’s the good son, the one who did exactly as their father asked and stayed safe down in the dark, where nothing could hurt him. Where he’d never be anything more, either. Dad’s not in there anywhere, and Sam wonders how long would go between
visits. Dean hangs up with the morgue in Marblehead, clears his throat like cloth tearing, starts dialing dutifully again. Maybe a month, Sam thinks, crossing his arm loosely over his stomach. Maybe longer. Dean down in the empty, researching, doing what he was told because that was all he knew how to do, following his routine like a good disciple, and it makes Sam want to still his blistered hands, quiet his wrecked voice, wrap him down into a blanket and make him just stop.

“Thanks,” Dean says, and hits end on the call. He crosses a line through the last note on the legal pad they’ve been using and stares at the scribbled-over paper for a few seconds. “Who’s next?”

His shoulders are hunched in, tired. Sam scrapes his teeth over his bottom lip and closes the laptop lid, makes a decision.

“Hey, maybe we should take a break,” he says. Dean sits up a little more, slants Sam a furrowed-brow look over his shoulder. “It’s been like four hours, dude.”

“I’m fine,” Dean says, in a voice raspy as a smoker’s, and Sam raises his eyebrows. Dean clears his throat, frowning. “Doesn’t matter, we should keep going.”

“We will, I promise,” Sam says, and he doesn’t know if he’s telling the truth right then or not, but—“We’ve just got to take a break. Come on, it’s almost five. Jenn’s gonna be home soon.”

Dean sits up straight, glancing at his watch. “Oh,” he says. “You want—should I—”

Already gathering his feet under himself, like he’s got to run out right away, and Sam could just murder himself for the years of silence, for letting Dean turn himself into a stranger. “You should stay,” he says, firm. “I still have tomorrow off, we can keep working then, okay. But, you know, for now, just stay for dinner.”

Dean licks his lips, looks down at the cluttered notepad. There’s a pause. “Dinner,” he says, playing with the edge of one of his band-aids.

“Yeah,” Sam says. “We—I don’t know, we can cook something. Like when we were kids.”

He gets a side-eyed look for that. “Sammy, you’ve never cooked a day in your life.”

“Hey!” Sam says, shoving at Dean’s shoulder. “That’s not true, okay. I make a damn good grilled cheese.”

“And a passable PB&J,” Dean says, dry, but the corner of his mouth’s turned up.

“Yeah, laugh it up,” Sam says, rolling his eyes, but Dean just snorts, gets up and heads into the kitchen. He’s still sort of unfamiliar with the unshaven jaw, the pale skin and the stillness, but padding through Sam’s apartment in his socks, he just—he’s reminding Sam of so much that he missed. Running around the bunker, play fighting, setting up blanket forts in the Impala, late nights staring up at the stars within the parameter of the boundary spells. He’s had a lot of good, since he left, and he’s not sorry that he did, but some things just can’t be replaced.

“Sam,” Dean says, jolting him. He’s got the fridge door open, looking into the depths of it. “You don’t actually have any... food.”

“Ah.” Sam stands up, puts his hands on his hips. Right. He and Jenn don’t exactly set records for housekeeping. Dean gives him the you’re hopeless look over the door, and Sam rolls his eyes. “Okay, so, we’re going to the store. Then we’ll have dinner.”

“You mean, ‘then I’ll cook dinner’,” Dean says, closing the fridge, and Sam says back, “Um, no,
"you’re going to cook dinner,” and while Dean starts up a whole who’s on first, no, that’s what I said, Sam tugs on his sneakers and watches Dean lace up his shoes and Sam, he just can’t stop grinning.

When they come back up the stairs an hour and a half later, loaded down with bags because Sam wasn’t actually sure if they owned any of the ingredients Dean kept listing off, and Dean was buying, anyway, so he insisted on bringing home half the store—Jenn’s home. She’s working on the couch, laptop balanced on her knees, and she gives Sam very high eyebrows when he dumps his armload onto the counter. “Hey, baby,” he says, and ignores her little fake hiss of annoyance. “We picked up groceries.”

“I can see that,” she says, and then lifts her face up for a kiss when Sam comes over. Mm. She tastes like the weird fruity tea she drinks, sometimes, and Sam sucks another little kiss against her lower lip before he pulls back. She smiles at him, and then turns a more-polite smile on Dean, where he’s hovering awkwardly in the kitchen, not looking at them. “You have a plan for all of this stuff?”

Sam tucks a loose tendril of hair behind her ear. “You’re in for a treat,” he promises, and goes to help Dean unload.

As far back as Sam can remember, the kitchen was Dean’s territory. Sam used to hang out while Dean would assemble dinner, that Carmen Sandiego show playing fuzzily on the TV on the back edge of the table. Even when their dad was around, and the rest of the bunker turned back into a functional office instead of a home, the kitchen was a haven. For Sam, it still kind of equals home, but mostly it means Dean, and it’s nice to have him actually here in their kitchen, grumbling about crappy knives and not enough counter space.

Sam can tell he’s grumbling, at least, even from over here on the couch. He’d been banished pretty much immediately upon the knives coming out, which he thinks is unfair, but Dean just reminded him of that time when Sam was eleven and tried to cook himself dinner and ended up needing six stitches, and, okay. He hasn’t forgotten how Dean’s a tyrant in the kitchen. Dean’s too polite to stop Jenn from helping, though, and so Sam gets to watch Dean carefully try to work around her, trying to give instructions while talking as little as possible. If Sam were nicer he’d be smoothing the way, but—hell, it’s what Dean gets. Maybe next time he’ll let Sam help.

He watches over the top of his book, instead. Dean took his jacket and tie off, at least, but he’s still buttoned down and prim next to Jenn in her slouchy tank-top and pajama shorts, her hair done up in a messy bun. She’s chatty, probably making a hash of chopping up the mushrooms, explaining about her class on Chaucer and how she just can’t stand the Canterbury tales, but her professor is encouraging and so she wants to do a good job, “even though if I hear one more rimming joke about the stupid Wife of stupid Bath, I am going to scream.” Dean keeps his eyes down, doesn’t smile, his shoulders tense as he cracks open the lobster, and Sam just puts his book down and doesn’t try to pretend he’s not staring.

He wishes they’d been able to beat Jenn home, if only to give Dean time to recover from the apparently overwhelming experience of a modern city grocery store. They couldn’t get much further from tiny little Ladow’s Market and its empty aisles if they tried. Dean had been wide-eyed and quiet the whole time, sticking close to Sam’s side and flinching when he got bumped, staring at all the choices, and the stupid lobster tank, unexpectedly, had ended up being the saving point of the whole thing. Thank god Dean had enough cash to cover it, because he’d lit up, surprised. They’re so—gross, he’d said, almost delighted, watching them skitter slowly along the bottom of the tank, and then, slow, does—does Jenn like lobster? Sam said, Jenn likes anything she doesn’t have to cook,
and Dean had bitten into his lower lip but couldn’t stop his grin, and Sam had thought, clear as a bell: he couldn’t let him go back to the bunker.

Dean’s doing something to the oven when Jenn jolts Sam out of his jumbled thoughts, says, “Hey, lazy, can you get plates or something?” She grins at him, eyes crinkling, as she whisks something in one of their few battered cooking bowls, and Sam tweaks her bun as he moves into the kitchen, easing carefully around Dean in the little space while he peeks into the broiler. They’ve got a half-dozen mismatched plates, some silverware he’s pretty sure Jenn stole from the student union, and he gathers up what he needs, sticking a finger into whatever Jenn’s stirring up—grinning and scooting away when she smacks his ass and says, “If you get salmonella, I’m not visiting you in the hospital.” He makes an attempt at place settings, drags the coffee table a little closer to the couch and snags the little side chair from their bedroom, and—okay, it’s kind of crappy. Nothing like what Dean’s used to, but Sam likes this a hell of a lot more than the impersonal luxury of the chapterhouse, or the almost institutional bunker.

When Dean pulls the lobster out of the oven, a stack of legal pads has to serve as a trivet on the coffee table, but it smells amazing and Dean looks pleased. He’s a little pink-cheeked from the heat of the kitchen, carefully serving out the shells. Jenn brings three beers over and kisses Sam on the cheek, sits close enough beside him on the couch that their knees bump, and it’s she who takes the first bite, and groans, and says, “Holy shit, Dean, when did you learn to cook like this?”

Dean’s still pink, though Sam doesn’t know if it’s still from the broiler or if it’s embarrassment, and he shrugs. “Just practice,” he says, quiet, and takes his own first bite. Sam copies him, and—okay, yeah. Goddamn. He catches Dean’s eye and gives him a thumbs-up, and Dean looks down at his own plate, but not before Sam sees the smile tucked into the corner of his mouth.

Jenn actually makes a mmm sound, eyes closed. “Seriously. Amazing. I can’t imagine how many tries it must’ve taken to get right.”

Dean shrugs, swallows his bite. “First try on this one, actually,” he says, not looking up. “Saw it on Julia Child, always wanted to give it a shot.”

Jenn’s eyebrows go high and Sam tries to hide his grin with a swig of beer. If he can get Dean to stay, he’s betting that he’ll get that expression out of Jenn at least once a day.

They eat and Sam asks Jenn more about her day, about the paper she’s working on—something about themes of betrayal in medieval literature, which he does actually think is interesting—but there’s a problem, which Sam really hadn’t anticipated, and that’s that Jenn is—nice. She doesn’t pry, really, but it’s antithetical to her nature to just let someone sit silently outside a conversation, and so she tries constantly to bring Dean in. She tells Sam about a meeting she has coming up with her advisor, who’s overworked and therefore always curt and kind of an asshole, and then turns and says, “So, Dean, where’d you go to school,” and it’s a question that would be innocuous, for anyone else, except for all of the years of secrets Dean holds tight in his chest. When he wipes his mouth, neatly, and says, “Kansas,” barely audible, Jenn just rolls right along and asks what he majored in, and it’s left to Sam to jump up and interrupt, ask Jenn if she wants another beer, to give Dean the space to drag up a lie, since he can’t tell anything close to the truth.

“I always wanted to study English, ever since freshman year of high school,” Jenn’s saying, and when Sam hands her a second beer he can see that she’s studying Dean, as he nods carefully and still doesn’t look up. “I just like—digging in, prying open what the words mean, you know?” Dean just nods, again, and Jenn taps her fingernails on the bottle. “You like reading?”

Dean looks up, at that, and glances at Sam. “Yeah.” It’s almost questioning, and Sam nods encouragingly at him as he takes another helping of the lobster. “I even like Chaucer,” he says, soft,
but with a tiny bit of his real personality coming through, and Sam grins down at his plate when Jenn groans, all theatrical.

They start talking about books, then—Sam’s reading a Roald Dahl omnibus, which gives the opportunity for Jenn to tell the story about calling him the BFG on their first date—and Dean doesn’t really open up much more, but he’s paying a little more attention. He looks to Sam half the time before answering any questions and he’s still shy, still stilted way beyond what Sam remembers, but—he’s here. He’s here, and he’s trying, and even if Jenn clearly freaks him out and they’re so far outside his frame of reference he might as well be on Mars, it’s okay. He’s making it work.

Sam washes the dishes, when they finish up, and Dean sits and proofreads Jenn’s essay, as she’d made him promise to do before she went to take her shower. It’s quiet, the rush of the water through the wall a solid undercurrent to the gentle racket Sam’s making. He didn’t even know they owned some of the things Dean managed to use. Jenn comes out in pajamas, her wet hair a dark red river down her back, and flips on the TV, finds something that’s only just started on the local channel. They end up all in a row on the couch, Jen tucked in against Sam’s left side and Dean sitting still and stiff on the other, watching some action movie from the nineties Sam doesn’t recognize as the evening drifts along into night, and it’s not perfect, but—it’s pretty damn close.

Dean falls asleep, well before the end of the movie. Even awkward as the situation is, he’s clearly exhausted. Sam covers him up with the blanket slung over the back of the couch, while Jenn gathers up the beer bottles for recycling. Dean’s is untouched, which Sam pretty much expected. He brushes his teeth, flexes his hands to feel the pull of his aching blisters, and Jenn shuts off the lights in the apartment, moving quiet so she won’t wake Dean. She’s already sitting in bed, crosslegged under the blanket, when Sam comes into the bedroom, a little fuzzy-headed from tiredness, and so it’s a surprise when she fixes him with a direct look and says, “Is he okay?”

Sam freezes for a second, stuck in the middle of tugging on his pajama pants. “What do you mean?” he says. Like there’s any question.

One of the many things he loves about Jenn is that she’s not stupid, and she doesn’t beat around the bush. Enough years of lies and misdirection gave him an appreciation for sincerity. She licks her lips, shakes her head. “He’s—he’s not like you, okay. I know that things with your family are sort of weird,” she says, though Sam’s never told her the half of it. “But he…"

She shakes her head again, looks down at her lap. Sam sits down on the edge of the bed. He rubs his fingers over his mouth, scraping over the little stubble he’s got.

“She doesn’t sound pitiful, and she’s not prying, because she doesn’t. Never has. He remembers that conversation— their second date, maybe, starting to talk about family because that’s what normal people did, after all. He hadn’t been joking. He’d never wanted her to know that.

“So, I haven’t asked about this, either—this little side trip, I mean,” she says. She shrugs. “I figured you’d tell me when you got back, but all night it didn’t come up. You know, the two of you, you didn’t mention your dad once? After your brother shows up in the middle of the night freaking out about him, and the two of you disappear to who knows where, and you come back with your hands all cut up?” Sam looks down at his band-aided palms, folds his hands into a knotted fist in his lap.
Jenn sighs. “So. I guess I’m asking.”

Sam nods, bites his lips between his teeth. She has been remarkably patient. He owes her something. Only—“I guess I don’t know where to start,” he says, which is true. “What do you want to know?”

Jenn folds her arms over her belly, shrugging again. “I don’t know. I mean—like, I don’t even really know how you grew up. Could you—I mean, did your dad let you talk to people, even, because from what I’m seeing—”

Sam scoffs, cutting her off. “Of course we—yes, we talked to people, god. It wasn’t a cult.”

His voice was harder than he meant, but still quiet, at least. They’ve barely been talking above a whisper, but he hopes to God that Dean’s still sound asleep. He can’t imagine him overhearing this.

Jenn’s face goes softer. “I’m sorry,” she says, and sounds like she means it. “But—what, then?”

“It was weird,” he says, and when she raises her eyebrows he kind of laughs, unexpectedly. It’s an understatement. He’s still not going to tell the truth, but he can—maybe he can get close to it.

“It was a really small town and we lived far out, isolated even from that. Kansas farm country, nothing around but fields. Dad traveled a lot, for work, and sometimes we’d have relatives come and stay with us when we were younger, but it was mostly just…me and him.” Long years of playing in the bunker under the variously indulgent eyes of visiting Men of Letters, those chosen few who interned at the center of all their knowledge, but they never really got close. They always left, and then it was Sam and Dean, alone again. When Sam was little he’d never understood that it was strange. He picks at one of the band-aids, coming loose. “You know we were home-schooled—and I’d go out, you know. Hung out with some of the kids from town. Played pick-up baseball. Farm kid stuff, sneaking beers in the loft of somebody’s barn, that kind of thing. Dean never did. Dad was really—protective, you know, always worried about something bad happening to us, because of what happened with our mom. He always wanted us safe, wanted us to stay close, and Dean was the good kid. Never did anything Dad might disapprove of. So, he stayed home, he studied. Looked after me. Never left. He just—never got the chance to be normal.”

A small hand appears on his wrist and he looks up to find Jenn biting her lip, eyes concerned. There’s a weird sad ache behind his breastbone and he covers her hand with his, because he—god. Dean.

“So, what happened?” she says. “This time.”

Sam takes a deep breath. “Dean lost contact with Dad,” he says, which is also true, though he won’t be truthful as to why. “With the anniversary of our mom’s death, and everything, he just—went off. I guess Dean wasn’t doing well on his own and he needed my help. We got it sorted out, Dad’s going to be fine, but—I don’t know. I’m just worried about Dean.”

Jenn squeezes his arm. “You think he could stay, a few days?” she says, her voice soft.

Sam nods, clears his throat. “I want him to.” He wants him to stay a lot longer than that. One day at a time, though. He picks her hand off his arm and kisses her knuckles. “Thanks, baby,” he says, lips brushing her soft sweet skin.

She flicks him on the chin, though gently. “Don’t call me that,” she says, and then leans in and kisses him, on the mouth and then on the forehead, lingering. He closes his eyes, breathes her in. “We’ll work it out, Sam. Everything will be okay.”
It’s windy, the trees rattling, and Sam wakes up with a start. His dream tucks back behind his eyes, unsettling and bright, and he blinks against the pillow, dry-mouthed and tired. The clock says it’s around one and he’s only been asleep for a few hours. He turns onto his back. Jenn’s still asleep, of course, hogging the blanket on her side of the bed. Sam tucks a hand behind his head, blinks up at the dim ceiling. There’s still planning to do, still all kinds of arguments he needs to formulate. It won’t be easy, convincing Dean, but—it’ll be worth it, and it’s for the best. For everyone’s sake.

He’s drifting again when there’s a rustle, under the wind from outside. His chest jumps—but it’s only Dean. Sam smiles, lets his eyes settle closed. It’s nice. Their bedrooms used to be right next to each other, back then, and for years he’d fallen asleep to the quiet little noises that would drift through the wall between them—Dean humming or even singing, sometimes, or reciting Latin declensions into the night. Like a bedtime story, even once he got too old to ask for one. Sam’s almost asleep again, exhaustion and memory pulling him back down into the dark, when there’s a creak, and a solid click, cutting clean through the night, and he opens his eyes and blinks up at the ceiling and—the door. The front door.

He nearly falls out of bed. Feet shoved into sneakers and his hoodie grabbed up off the floor, just enough that he’s halfway decent—and then he’s out of the apartment, running down the stairs in the dead of night, hissing, “Dean, don’t you dare—” even as he hears the door down in the lobby creak open and shut. He jumps down the last half-flight and stumbles through the empty lobby, flings himself out into the night, and—yes, there’s Dean, damn it, a dark shadow already almost to the car, trying to leave, again, and Sam’s across the street in what feels like an instant, grabs Dean by the elbow and says, “Dean,” breathless, his chest tight.

“Sam,” Dean says, dropping his head a little, and then he turns around. The streetlight down at the corner illuminates the paleness of his face, but leaves his eyes dark.

Sam lets go of his arm, after a silent second. “You weren’t even going to say goodbye?”

Dean sighs. “I needed to bring your bag upstairs for you,” he says, finally. “I was going to leave a note.”

“A note,” Sam says. Overhead, the wind quiets a little, though the bare twigs and branches still shiver together. He zips his hoodie up, folds his arms against the cold. “Seriously? That’s it?”

“Sammy,” Dean says. Shakes his head. His face is drawn, from what Sam can see. “I need to go home. There’s work I need to do. Dad’s still gone, and I—”

“But we—Dean, I’m going to help you with that,” Sam says. Dean’s not really looking at him and Sam puts a hand on his shoulder. “I swear, Dean. I really am. But—you can’t do anything more from the bunker. We—you can stay here, with us.”

Dean shakes his head, again, and shoves his hands into his pockets. “I’m not going to get in the way of you and your girlfriend. You wanted a life, Sam, and you got it. I don’t want to ruin that.”

“You’re not,” Sam says. A gust of wind whips down the street, cuts through his thin pajama bottoms, but he ignores it. “Dean, come on. You’re my brother. And we made a pretty great team back there, didn’t we?”

He shakes Dean’s shoulder, a little, and finally Dean looks up at him. After a second the corner of his mouth quirks. “Yeah,” he says, quiet. “Yeah, we did.”

“Yeah,” Sam says, smiling back. He hasn’t thought of all the arguments, hasn’t figured out what he’ll need to keep Dean, but he’s got this, at least. Dean never did have much of a defense against
Sam just asking for something, outright. “So, listen,” he says, “we’ll—”

“Sam,” Dean says, sharp. His eyes have drifted, past Sam’s face, and he’s looking—up. “Third floor.”

“What?” Sam says, and turns, follows Dean’s eyeline. Third floor, their window, and—a shadow passes through in the dark, unfamiliar and tall and—and not Jenn, and Dean says Sam but Sam’s heart is already in his throat, and he’s running, because—he didn’t lock the door, did he even close it all the way, he doesn’t know, he doesn’t know and he’s through the lobby, he’s vaulting up three stairs at a time and somewhere behind him someone’s calling his name but he can’t, he can’t because Jennifer’s—he slams up to the third floor and crashes into the apartment and it’s silent. It’s silent and dark and he can’t see anything, he says, “Jenn,” with his breath a faint wisp in his empty lungs, and he pushes open the bedroom door and the bed is—is empty. He stands there and stares, and then there’s a flat wet splat and a thin little gasp. He looks, he looks up, and—she’s there, her hair falling dark all around her pale white face, pinned up to the ceiling like a butterfly stuck to a mounting board, arms immobile and her legs an odd twist, and even as he stares, struck for a second dumb, in the space between her pajama shorts and her little tank a dark spot widens on the soft pale skin of her belly, and widens further, and it takes a moment for his brain to compute, that—that’s blood, and there’s another spatter on the wood floor and she says, “Sam,” her voice a weird faint twist, and it’s only when his heart decides to keep beating and his muscles unfreeze, it’s only then that the fire blooms out from behind the very core of her.

“No!” He says it and doesn’t know he’s saying it, he lunges forward—and he’s caught, around the middle, arrested even as the fire licks unnaturally fast over the ceiling. No something says, but he has to—she’s there, she’s staring at him and he can save her, he knows he can, there’s probably some kind of spell or a ritual to stop the fire, to bring her down—and he wrestles at the arms around his waist, fights back, because he can save her—

He doesn’t quite remember the next few minutes. He sits on the cold asphalt with his back straight against the curve of the Impala’s side, looks at nothing. The fire truck comes. People spill out into the night. There’s chatter. What happened? Where did it start? Electrical fire, maybe? Was anyone hurt? The wind keeps blowing. It smells like it did when they burned the body.

Through it all, Dean stands at his side, watching the firemen work. He’s close enough that Sam can feel a hint of warmth. It would feel like protection, any other day.

Finally, the firemen stop spraying water. The fire’s out, and now the night’s back to darkness interrupted only by the red-blue strobe of their lights. Dean shifts, at his side, his leg pressed up now against Sam’s shoulder. Sam closes his eyes. Behind them he can still see—the fire. Her face. Her shocked-open eyes.

Hands pull him away from the car and warm surrounds his shoulders. He looks, and Dean’s crouched next to him, settling his coat around Sam’s body. “You’re shaking, Sammy,” he says, quiet, and his voice sounds weird until Sam sees that his face is wet. Sam fists one hand in the wool, warm from Dean’s body. He is shaking. Doesn’t know how to stop. A hand settles on his shoulder. He looks up at the ruined front of the apartment building, at the broken-open window. He pulls the old peacoat tighter around himself. There was a shadowy figure. He blinks, swallows. There was a fire, and a woman died.

“November second,” he says, out loud, his voice rough with the smoke.

“What?” Dean says, but Sam knows that Dean heard him.

He stands up, slowly. His legs feel steady, at last. A fire. That’s how it started. He rubs a hand over
his face, smears away at the wet and the grit. He shrugs the coat off his shoulders and hands it to Dean, who takes it with both hands, his eyes watchful. Sam takes a deep breath. “We’ve got to find Dad,” he says. “We’ve got work to do.”
Newport, New Hampshire: November 5, 2005

Mrs. Clark can’t stop crying.

An old building. That’s what Sam keeps saying. Say something enough and it becomes true.

“It was an old building,” Mr. Clark says, to someone. The woman puts a hand on his arm. Mr. Clark keeps shaking his head, like he’s trying to say it’s not true. “An old building, and—and the wires, I guess it was.”

“I’m so sorry,” the woman says, low and sincere. Sam braces both hands against the window sill. Looks out at the chill November twilight.

An old building, he’d said. The investigator had sat both of them down together. Just routine follow-up questions. Neither of them had slept. Sam still in his pajama pants, his clothes still reeking of smoke. The lights flickered in the bedroom sometimes, Sam had said. Dean had been silent at his side, looking down at the table. The lies came easy. All those case-files, from when they were kids. All that reading they’d had to do. The lights flickered, Sam had said, and sometimes the bedroom door stuck. It was an old building.
“A terrible accident,” Sam hears someone say, now. The funeral home is classy, dim-lit. Small. Her family fills the viewing room, the seats, and the foyer—where Sam thought he could be alone, but no. Cousins and aunts and querulous grandparents, shocked and white-faced. Friends from high school, grade school. People from college, and he recognized some but didn’t open himself to talk about what happened. To talk about her. He leans a hip against the window sill and watches a girl he’s met at parties hold Mrs. Clark’s hands in her own, both of their eyes full of tears. Two older women nearby whisper together, and one nods his way. The other catches his eye and then, embarrassed, looks away just as fast. How is the story being told, he wonders, but then—it hardly matters, does it. The only person whose opinion mattered is gone. There’s nothing left, not here.

Dean’s back in Boston, at the motel they’d found after the police finally let them go. Sam knows the investigator wanted to ask more questions, it was in his eyes—_how did you get out, and why her and not you, and where were you_. They went to the motel, a cheap place near the interstate where the clerk didn’t question Sam’s red eyes or Dean’s silence, and Sam took a shower, finally, washed off the smoke-smell under the too-low sputtering lukewarm spray, and then he went out into the room and pulled his one clean change of clothes out of the duffel that had been in the trunk and he sat down on the bed and said, _what can we do_, and Dean had looked at him with his eyes dark and heavy in his face, and taken a slow deep breath, and said—

“Sam,” someone says, and Mr. Clark is there. Sam blinks, and turns. The pastor is standing at Mr. Clark’s side—both of them slightly balding, and paunchy, and short. “Pastor, this is Sam Winchester, Jennifer’s boyfriend,” Mr. Clark says. He still looks... stunned, kind of. Like the world’s moved a step to the left and he hasn’t caught up.

The pastor reaches for Sam’s hand and Sam lets him have it. He gets a two-handed shake, the pastor’s small hand not even close to covering his, and a tight, sympathetic smile. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Sam,” he says, and sounds like he actually means it. “A true tragedy. I’ll pray for the Clark family, and for you.”

Sam nods, but there’s nothing he can say to that. He takes his hand back. The man pats his arm, giving another of those tight smiles, and moves off, leading Mr. Clark and talking lowly in his ear, and he probably thinks he’s really helping. Maybe he is.

The wake ends at eight o’clock and the family disperses. Sam rides back to the Clarks’ house in the back of their minivan, staring out the window at the dark. Quiet little New Hampshire town, nothing’s going on at night. Small houses. A school, a church. They came up here, a few times, and she’d pointed out her elementary school, the little league field where her brothers had played and where she’d had her first kiss, under the bleachers. They’d recreated that—hopping the fence, midnight on the Fourth of July, and he’d been too tall for it and knocked his head against the underside. She’d leaned against him while he cursed and she’d laughed so hard she cried.

The house is tidy. Her brothers are with their wives at their own homes, and so it’s just Sam, with her parents, and Mr. Clark shows him quietly back up to her old bedroom before disappearing down the hall. Sam closes the door, and stands for a second there in the dark. It’s dusty in here. He takes off the suit they rented for him, hangs it neatly from the hook on the door. He’ll need to wear it again tomorrow. It’s not even nine o’clock and his stomach clenches, empty, but he ignores it. Lays down on the creaky little full mattress. The moonlight’s enough to show the Lord of the Rings posters they never took down, the little bookshelf packed with all her tattered favorites. From the hallway, there’s a burst of noise—a sob, and then a murmured voice, cut off when a door closes. Sam shuts his eyes and rolls so his face is pressed into the pillow. It doesn’t smell like anything but dust.

In the motel room they tried the _rituale praedator_, Dean murmuring in smooth fast Latin, incense
smoke rising in a circle around him while Sam watched, his fists in a knot. They tried an invocation, a bundle of hazel burning while Dean, eyes closed, whispered *biotáille, taispéain dom an fhoinse*, and the room smelled for a second of cool rain, but—no whispers came back, and when Dean opened his eyes he shook his head, and Sam had to go stand outside in the night and listen to the highway traffic and try not to scream. Herbs burned and Dean turned Sam’s smoke-ruined clothes into a fetish and the honey-scented candle melted down to the quick, and nothing. Finally, Dean said, *we have to go back*, and it was three in the morning but they got in the car and they drove back across the dark city with Sam’s hands clenched white-knuckled on the wheel, and they climbed up the stairs through the evacuated empty building and broke the police tape and then they stood there in the ruin of it, and Dean went down on his knees and drew a chalk circle on the sooty floor, and Sam stood behind him and stared at—nothing, at ash and ruined wet wood, not even hearing whatever spell Dean was working now, because there was the destroyed kitchen and a charred misshapen lump that was the couch they’d picked out together, and there, yawning dark, the blackened empty bedroom door—

The morning is clear, the sun bright and the air crisp and cold. A headache pulses behind Sam’s eye. He sits in the pew just behind her parents for the funeral service and keeps his eyes down, trying not to clench his fists. His blisters are nearly healed but the palms are still tender. He keeps swiping his thumb over the pink new skin. When it’s time he stands, and follows her family to the cars. He sits in the Impala, alone, and waits for her parents’ car to pull onto the road. The cemetery isn’t far.

He and her two brothers and her dad carry the coffin from the hearse. Sam’s at the front, with Mike, who’s not nearly as tall as him, and so he has to slump a little, his shoulder dropped low under the slight weight. The coffin’s a nice one, solid lid, but it’s—light, so godawful light, because there’s nothing in it. Just a few salvaged bones and pictures that her parents had picked out. Like memories will make up the weight of the person who’s lost. They put the box down and then Sam goes and stands behind the chair where Mrs. Clark is sitting hunched, leaning forward as though over a bullet-wound in the gut, and he stares at the smooth white lid of the coffin and lets the pastor’s words wash over him.

When it’s over, Sam stands in the emptying graveyard. The family is moving away, back to the cars, and Mike had squeezed Sam’s shoulder and said that they’d see him back at the house for the reception. He said, *take your time*. There’s a light breeze, fresh and chill with morning, and Sam lifts his face into it, closes his eyes for a few seconds. When he opens them again, the grave is still there, open, and the guys who work for the cemetery are waiting a few semi-respectful yards off for everyone to clear out so they can fill up the hole again and be done for the day. Sam crouches and looks down at the coffin, at the mounds of white roses. He has to clear his throat before he can speak. “Goodbye, baby,” he says, quiet enough that the waiting gravediggers won’t hear. She’d kick him. He stands up and nods to the diggers, and walks back to the where the Impala’s waiting. He sits there, behind the wheel, for a long time.

* *

The drive out of the New Hampshire countryside is quick, but he hits traffic on the highway south, and so it’s past noon when he makes it back to the little motel in Boston. The parking lot’s close to empty, most people out and doing something with their day. Their room is right at the end of the low building and the curtains are fully drawn, the room shut up tight, with the battered ‘privacy please’ sign still dangling from the doorknob. Sam knocks twice, quick, but before there’s a chance to answer he unlocks the door and shoves his way inside, slamming it closed behind him.

Dean’s standing up from the rickety little table, startled, when Sam looks up. “I didn’t—I didn’t know it was you,” he’s saying, while Sam tosses the keys onto the bed and then drops onto his back to follow them. He’s more tired than he should be. Dean’s quiet for a few seconds, while Sam just
breathes. It smells like five kinds of incense in here, the air thick with it. “How did it go,” Dean says, finally.

Sam shakes his head, staring up at the ceiling. The room is dim, with only the lamps on, and kind of cold even through his suit jacket. He wonders if Dean figured out how to work the heater under the window or if he just gave up and slept in the cold. After a long moment of silence, he sits up and braces his hands on his knees. “Please tell me you found something,” he says.

Dean’s sitting again, his arms folded on the table in front of him. “Not yet,” he says, eyes lowered. “I tried—I mean, I’ve tried a lot of things. Rituals of calling, revealing, trying to get spirits to speak to me. I tried a seance, but it’s—with just one person it’s hard.”

Sam scrubs his hands against his knees, restless. “We can try again now I’m back,” he says, but Dean’s already shaking his head.

“I don’t think it’ll work, Sammy,” he says, and he sounds like—trying to let Sam down easy, maybe. Sam stares at him. “I—I didn’t have all the stuff I needed in my go-bag, and so I called a—a taxi, and went to a supply store.”

Sam blinks. “You took a cab?”

Dean shrugs. “You had the Impala,” he says, like it’s a perfectly reasonable thing for him to have done. “I figured it can’t be all that different from the movies.” Sam smiles at that, if only briefly, and Dean rolls his eyes. “Anyway. I remembered a Wiccan-run place from the logs, back home, and so I found it and stocked up on some components, you know, jasmine and oil of abramelin, that kind of stuff. But the woman behind the counter, once she realized I was with the Letters, she—she must have been a sensitive.”

“What?” Sam says, and finds himself standing. “What do you mean? What did she say?”

He was louder than he meant to be. Dean blinks at him. “She said, she thought I must be here because of the fire,” Dean says. He’s slowly twisting his silver ring around on his finger, leaning his elbows hard on the table. “She said she knew something really bad had happened, that there had been some major—surge, is how she put it. Something big, out of the ordinary.”

“Did she know what it was?” Sam says. God, he hadn’t even thought about this. A psychic witness—that could answer everything. “Did she tell you what she saw?”

Dean shrugs, and looks at the table. “Just darkness, is what she said. Darkness, and nothing else. She said she couldn’t get more than that.”

Sam shoves a hand through his hair. “There’s got to be more,” he says. He checks his watch—it’s still early in the day, some psychic’s little woo-woo shop will still be open, it’s got to be. He’s still wearing his rented suit and he looks more like a Man of Letters than he ever has, and Dean—“Come on,” Sam says, grabbing the keys off the bed. “I want to talk to her, there’s got to be something she wasn’t telling you.”

Dean stands up, brow furrowed. “Sammy—”

“Come on!”

* The store isn’t far, down in Brookline near Coolidge Corner. It’s a scuffed, dreary kind of street, but the shop stands out in rainbow, colorful curtains and crystals displayed in the windows. Sam smooths
his hair behind his ears and shoves his way in, the little shop bell tinkling above him. There’s soft
moody lighting, gentle music playing over the speakers tied inexpertly up by the ceiling. The woman
behind the counter looks up with a smile from whatever book she’s reading, but it fades when she
sees Dean.

“Hello, gentlemen,” she says, and marks her page and closes the book very deliberately. Her voice is
crisp, formal, despite the tie-dye t-shirt she’s wearing, the messy half-dreaded tangle of her hair.
She’s in her fifties, maybe, grey at the temples and dark eyes marked with crow’s feet. “Two visits
from the Men of Letters in two days, that must be some kind of record.”

Sam smiles, and it feels fake. “Sam Winchester,” he says. “I think you already met my brother.”

“I did,” she says. She folds her hands together on top of her book. It’s a moment before she
introduces herself. “Maritza.”

“You know something,” Sam says, and takes a few steps further into the shop. She doesn’t change
expression, much, though she leans back a little. “There was a fire, a few nights ago. November
second.”

“All Souls’ Day,” Maritza says, and cuts a look to Dean. “Yes, I’m aware. We talked about this.”

“Have you dealt with the Men of Letters before?” Sam says.

She stiffens, and he clears his throat, tries to calm down. “A few times,” she says. “When your
agents need herbs for the magic they deign to do, or when a boy thinks it’s time to interrogate a
woman because she might know something he doesn’t.”

Sam smiles, again, and then Dean’s there, putting a hand low on his forearm. He twitches away, but
he takes a deep breath anyway. “Maritza,” he says. “We’re not here to put you on a list, or test you,
or anything like that. We just need to ask questions about what happened that night.”

She raises her eyebrows, and glances again at Dean. “We talked about this,” she says again, but her
voice isn’t as sharp. “There was—a darkness.”

“Right, but what was it,” Sam says, and her voice might have been softer but his isn’t. “What—a
possession? A ghost? A demon? I need to know.”

Maritza narrows her eyes at him. “Let’s get this straight. I am no witch. Your brother and I spoke on
this already. He has done his rituals—haven’t you?” Dean nods, next to him, but doesn’t speak. “I’m
not gifted, not like some. All I can tell is what I feel. All I felt was…” She shakes her head and looks
down at the battered counter.

“Darkness,” Sam says.

She nods, and doesn’t look up. “A thing of evil. I woke up, in the night, and it was like a nightmare I
couldn’t remember. A black—nothing. Maybe someone stronger could have told what did it, or what
happened, but I doubt it.”

“Why?” Dean says, unexpectedly.

She rubs her hands together, a dry rasping in the quiet of the room. “I get feelings,” she says. She
picks up a big polished opal from the counter, turns it over and over. “Love pouring off a new
couple. Fear and stress when I walk past a clinic. Things anyone could guess, but I feel them
stronger, and they linger in the air after, sometimes for days. The thing that woke me up that night—”
She closes her hands around the opal, clutching it like a talisman. Maybe it is a talisman. “That was a
shock, over the whole city. But now, nothing. It’s like the air was wiped clean. Something that strong, and now it’s gone? Someone is hiding the thing that was done.”

Sam squeezes his eyes closed, pinches the bridge of his nose. “Someone.”

“Or something.” The gentle hippie music switches tracks, and a light sound of rain fills the little shop. “You can do all the rituals you want to, Mr. Winchester, but this is a thing that doesn’t want to be found.”

Sam nods, and turns around, setting his hands on his hips. He looks at the little display in front of him. Healing crystals, essential oil. Little hopes and dreams, things that never work.

Behind him, Maritza says, “I read in the paper that a girl died. I’m sorry I don’t have more to tell you, but I just don’t. You don’t need to keep coming back.”

“Sorry,” Dean says, softly, and before he can hear anything else Sam walks directly out of the shop, goes to stand on the sidewalk and breathe the cold air. Clouds have moved in, since the morning, and it’s a greyish afternoon, not many people out. He drags a hand over his face, breathes out long and slow. Nothing. He believes her, if for no other reason than that she was pissed off.

The door jingles quietly open and shut again. Sam stands still, on the empty sidewalk, his eyes closed, his hand over his mouth. All that, and for nothing. He can still see her, behind his eyes. Burning. He drops his hand and scrubs it over his hip, tries to collect himself. When he manages to look at the world again there’s the bare spindly trees, and the bookshop next door, and across the street a thrift store with cheap leftover Halloween costumes in the window, and he realizes and says in the same moment, unthinking, “God, I don’t have any clothes.”

His voice is cracked, right down the middle. Dean says, “Sam?” but Sam’s thinking of the apartment. All their laundry, piled messily together, gone now. He’s still got some cash in his account, since he didn’t end up paying his share of the rent. If he wants to keep going, this is one step forward.

“Come on,” Sam says, and jerks his head at the store across the street. Dean looks at it and back to him with a furrowed brow. “You can see how the other half lives.”

* 

It’s a neat little store. Shabby around the edges, but clean, and while they’re clearly going for the hipster vibe it’s also still actually cheap, not like those ‘vintage’ stores Brandi gets her dresses from. Sam and Dean in their suits both get raised eyebrows from the bored kid at the register, but he soon goes back to his comic book, and then Sam’s piling his basket with five dollar jeans, two dollar t-shirts. Button-down, flannels, a pack of cheap undershirts someone must have forgotten and then donated.

“You can see how the other half lives.”

“Is this where you get all your clothes?” Dean says, and Sam turns around from flicking through the men’s large t-shirts to see Dean holding out one in bright purple, vaguely perplexed.

It looks roughly the right size, and Sam plucks it out of his hand and drops it in the basket. “Not all, but some,” he says, and grabs another flannel, blue this time, off the rack next to them. “Not quite the same as sending away to get your suits tailored.”

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Do they also have a section for dressing the holier-than-thou?” he says. “Or is that a different store?”

Sam rolls his eyes. “Do you even own a pair of jeans?” he says.
“Why would I need them,” Dean says, and then nods over at the display near the big shop windows. “It’s getting cold, you need a coat.”

Dean’s wearing his own, the one Dad handed down, his hands shoved into the deep pockets, shadows of tiredness under his eyes. For all the mild bickering he’s still watching Sam like he’s a bomb that’s going to go off. Sam goes to the rack of coats and flicks through the worn-shiny wools and terrible windbreakers, trying to find something roughly his size.

“Try that black one,” Dean says, behind him, and so Sam puts down his basket of clothes and tugs it off the hanger, slips it on and looks at the three inches of exposed wrist, and there’s a second where he thinks, pain-bright and clear, I can’t do this. He squeezes his eyes closed, shuts out the fluorescent-bright of the store for a moment.

“Do you really think she was telling the truth,” Sam says.

There’s a long pause. “Yeah, Sammy. She didn’t have any reason to lie to us.”

Sam knows. He takes a breath, and tugs off the coat, trades it out for a brown one. “So, what then. We just—leave? There has to be something we’re missing.”

Dean’s sitting on the shoe display when Sam turns around. “I know,” he says. When Sam raises his eyebrows, he sighs. “We’ve done everything I can think of, all the rituals of calling. It’s like Maritza said, I think. It doesn’t want to be found.”

Sam shakes his head. He tugs off the coat, which fits well enough, and tosses it into his nearly-full basket. There’s a black hoodie on the rack and he grabs that, too. Winter’s coming.

“November second,” Sam says. When he looks up, Dean’s biting his lips between his teeth. “A fire, and a woman pinned to the ceiling. You know it’s the same thing.”

“I know,” Dean says. He rubs a hand over the back of his neck and sighs. “And Dad, disappearing. It’s not a coincidence.”

Sam thinks of the letter that was left with the journal. Strict instructions to keep the secrets long after it made any kind of sense, a deliberate going away, but—no. No, it’s not a coincidence. It can’t be.

“We need to find him,” Sam says. Dean’s watching him, he knows it, but he just tosses the hoodie into the basket and picks it up.

“Yeah,” Dean says, more quietly.

Sam leads the way to the register and pays no attention while the kid checks the tags on his stuff, while the cost of the meager replacements get totted up. Their father, for all his many faults, is a Warder of the Men of Letters, a legacy with years of experience in the life. He and Dean were only told the barest details of what had happened, at their home back in Lawrence—the fire, their mother pinned and burned, the house ruined and their lives left with a gaping hole that they all skirted, never speaking of it if possible. The topics of the research were secret but the fact of it wasn’t, and he’d be gone for weeks, sometimes, tracking leads, looking for answers. They can help, Sam thinks, while the kid piles his new clothes in thin brown paper bags. If Dad will just let them in, he knows they can help. If nothing else they have additional evidence to share, and there’s nothing their dad likes more than a new lead. Now the job will just be to find him, and convince him.

They’re at the Impala and Sam’s stowing the bags in the trunk when it occurs to him. “Wait,” he says, and Dean pauses, halfway through opening the passenger door. “How did you find me?”
“What?” Dean says, frowning. “When?”

Sam closes the trunk, stands there with the keys in his hand. “I should’ve asked—” before, he wants to say, but Dean’s panicky state was too distracting in the moment. He shakes his head. “You didn’t even have my phone number,” he says. “We hadn’t talked in—forever.”

Dean’s expression goes still, his eyes shuttering, but not before Sam saw the little moment of realization. He’s guilty about that silence, will be for a long time, but—right now, this is more important.

“I knew you were in Boston,” Dean says, finally. He takes a breath, and then jerks his head at the car and gets in.

There’s no one on the sidewalks, not really, but Sam rolls his eyes and gets in, too, turns the engine over. “No one to overhear now,” he says, glancing across the seat as they get moving.

Dean’s hands are in his lap and he’s turning his rings slowly, twisting them in turns. It takes him a few blocks to start talking. “After—when you stopped emailing, I thought—” He cuts off and Sam keeps his eyes on traffic, swallowing. They’re really only about ten minutes from the motel. “I used the gyrotheodolite and the silver pendulum, narrowed down on maps a few times. Didn’t take long.”

“Yeah, but—I thought that, at most, you could get to maybe a half-mile radius. You walked in the front door.” They get stuck at a red light and he looks over again. Dean’s still looking at his hands. “You narrowed it down a lot more than that, man.”

“Blood calls to blood,” Dean says, to his lap.

Sam frowns, follows traffic forward. It’s been a while, but he remembers that phrase from studying, years and years ago, but he can’t quite—wait. “Orbis cruento,” he says, and Dean winces. “You made a tracking spell? On me?”

“It’s a thaumatic compass,” Dean says, in that pedantic you should study big brother voice he’d use sometimes, but then he sighs, giving it up. “Okay, yeah, I did.”

“Dean,” Sam says, and stops, squeezing the steering wheel. “That’s just—gross. Where did you get my—how did you get the blood?” Dean gives him a pained look, and Sam waves a hand. Who knows what freaky crap is stowed away in the bunker. “Ugh, nevermind, I don’t want to know.”

There’s a long pause. “Well. Then all I had to do was tie it to the needle and add blood drawn from my life line, and it pulled me toward you. The magic doesn’t last forever, though.”

A few minutes more of driving and then Sam finally pulls into the motel lot and shoves the Impala into park. When he looks over Dean’s holding a small compass in a leather case that he pulled from his pocket, the fine crystal cover smeared with dried blood, rust-brown. He knows he’s making a face, but he can’t help it. Sure enough, though—the needle’s spinning idly, not bearing toward him.

“Can you reactivate it?” Sam says.

Dean looks at him, for a long moment. “If I needed to,” he says, finally, but then says, right away: “What’s this about? You never liked the magic before.”

“I didn’t like being forced to study it,” Sam corrects, but he’s thinking back to the bunker, to the endless storage containers and weird little cabinets, all the things Dean and their dad and all the warders before them had tucked away. He turns the car off and looks at the closed door to the room. “Can you make the same thing for Dad? Can we find him, like that?”
He expects a pause, Dean thinking things slowly through like their dad always drilled into them to do, but Dean answers immediately. “No, I can’t.”

“Why not? You’ve got reagents and rituals for everything, you’re telling me you don’t have something that can track down Dad?”

Dean stares at him, brow knotted. “Sam, don’t you think if I had something I would’ve tried it before I came halfway across the country to find you?”

Sam sits back, dragging a hand through his hair. “Yeah,” he says. God, he needs to get his head together. Of course Dean did. “I just—there’s got to be some way we can track him down.”

“I tried,” Dean says, more softly. “I even pulled out the gyrotheodolite again but it didn’t—it didn’t even move. Like he’d just… vanished.”

Sam remembers learning about that spell, the way the pendulum swung over map of the whole country. It only wouldn’t work, he remembers the adept instructing them, if the subject had hidden themselves by some magical means—or if they were dead.

“He’s alive,” Sam says. Dean’s looking down at his lap again, hands fisted closed over the bloody compass. “I know he is. We’re going to find him.”

Dean nods, but doesn’t look up.

They’re still just sitting in front of the motel. Sam swings open his door and gets out into the chilly air—warmer, now, with his new-ish coat. As he turns his head he catches a whiff of that weird musty thrift store smell, rising off the coat with the warmth of his body. Across the street from the motel and two doors down there’s a laundromat, open and empty, with a one-hour dry-cleaner attached. He takes a deep breath. Keep moving forward. It’s the only way he’ll get through the day.

He looks over the top of the car and nods at Dean’s wrinkled suit. “You look like an unmade bed,” he says.

Dean raises his eyebrows at him, but then looks down at the suit, too, and shrugs. “The room doesn’t have an iron,” he says, with a faint offended note.

Sam rolls his eyes, and goes to unlock the trunk. “Okay, let’s correct this travesty.”

* 

Sam changes into the one semi-clean pair of jeans and a t-shirt that had been saved by being in his duffle in the trunk, and gathers up the rest of his dirty old clothes into the bags with the new ones. First stop is to the dry cleaner, who takes Sam’s new coat and his now-stolen suit. He hopes the rental place doesn’t charge Jenn’s parents too much for the loss. At Sam’s urging, Dean hands over his charcoal grey that got so dirty from grave-digging, and the navy blue jacket he’s wearing, and he doesn’t seem happy about it even as they’re walking into the laundromat with Sam’s bags.

“It’ll be fine,” Sam says, for the third time. It’s dingy in here, but three of the washing machines don’t have ‘out of order’ signs on them, and that’s plenty.

“I just don’t see how it can get done in an hour without them ruining something,” Dean says, arms folded under his draped peacoat. “Mr. Reeder has it ready the next day, that seems to work fine.”

Sam snorts. “Mr. Reeder has the weirdest business model of all time,” he says. He feeds his last few wrinkly dollars into the change machine. “Who runs a half-dry cleaner, half-feed store?”
“How else could he keep it open,” Dean says, reasonably, and when Sam turns around he finds Dean neatly sorting the new clothes into color-separated piles. Of course.

“I have actually done laundry before,” Sam says. Dean gives him a dubious look, going through the pants pockets, and then pulls out a crumpled receipt and a tissue and hands them over with a small smile. Sam sighs. “Okay, fine, knock yourself out.”

He picks up Dean’s ancient leather suitcase and opens it up, too, so Dean can throw them all in together. “Okay, so,” Sam says, folding his arms and leaning against the table. “What are we going to do, to find Dad?”

Dean unballs a pair of socks, shaking his head. “I don’t know what else we can do,” he says, eyes on his hands. “The chapterhouse didn’t know where he went and he’s not answering his phone, and magic—if he’s hiding from something, he knows how to ward himself so nothing bad can find him, but then neither can we.”

Sam drums his fingers on his bicep, thinking. There might be clues in the journal, something they might be able to put together from what their dad left behind. Dean pulls his own few clothes out of his suitcase: white shirt, grey shirt, light blue stripe, those terrible plain white boxers their dad bought for them when they were kids and which Dean just kept wearing. “You need more clothes,” Sam says. If they’re going to be on the road they won’t have time to stop at a laundromat every four days.

Dean frowns, looks up at him. “Why?” he says, and gathers up all their whites into a pile. “I’ve got clothes at home.”

“Right, but—” Sam shrugs. “Dad’s not—if we’re going to keep looking, we can’t look from there.”

Dean stares at him for a second, and then he sighs. “Sammy,” he starts, and he’s already shaking his head.

“You want to go back?” Sam says, standing up straight. He hadn’t thought this would be a problem. “Dean.”

“Sam,” Dean retorts, immediately. Sam raises his eyebrows, and Dean throws up his hands. “I have a responsibility,” he says. He picks up the pile of whites and tosses them into the waiting, open machine. “Dad wouldn’t want things to fall apart in the bunker.” Before Sam can fire back, Dean pokes at the battered control panel on the machine. “How do you work this thing?”

Sam bites the inside of his cheek and comes over, feeds in the seventy-five cents for a wash. It’s more modern than the rickety seventies machines Dean’s had to fix over and over back in the bunker, but just barely. “You should wash that, too, it’s gonna walk off soon,” Sam says, jerking his head at Dean’s white button-down, and then says over Dean’s sigh, trying to be politic, “I know the bunker’s important, but it’s not more important than finding this thing. Not to Dad.”

Dean says, “But if he can’t be sure his position with the Letters is safe, then how can he keep hunting it,” and that’s almost reasonable, but Sam’s staring at his wrist, where he’s unbuttoned his cuff and it’s falling away while he undoes the topmost button at his collar, and Sam says, “Wait—what is that?”

“What,” Dean says, following his eyes, and then he shoves his sleeve back down. “Nothing.”

“No, you’ve got—” Sam says, and picks up Dean’s wrist, the left one, and when he peels the cuff back—there, peeking out from under the smooth leather band of their grandfather’s watch. “What the hell,” Sam says, and looks up to find Dean going red. “When did you get a tattoo?”
Dean twitches, under Sam’s grip, and Sam lets him take his hand back after a shocked still second. “I didn’t—” Dean says, and swallows. “I didn’t go get a tattoo, that’s not…”

He trails off, and Sam just stares at him. “Dean, there is ink on your wrist, and it’s not Sharpie,” he says. What on earth. As far as he knows, Dean hasn’t even left Smith County in years, and Sam knows damn well that there’s nothing as cosmopolitan as a tattoo parlor within fifty miles of Lebanon. Dean’s still flushed up to his ears, not saying anything, and Sam says, “What, did you go through a punk phase while I was gone, or something?”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Of course not.” He twitches his sleeve, shrugging his shoulders uncomfortably. “They’re functional, not for—fashion.”

“Functional,” Sam repeats, frowning. Then— “Wait, ‘they’? As in, multiple?”

Dean blinks and then says shit under his breath. “I—yeah.” He looks down at the washing machine, full now with hot water, and then says, “Okay,” like he’s just decided something. He unbuttons his shirt all the way, shrugs it off his shoulders and tosses it into the load so he’s just left in his white undershirt, tucked neatly into his slacks. He closes the lid, so the cycle finally starts, and then takes a step back from Sam and holds out his left arm, fist clenched but his wrist turned up.

Sam stares. Dean’s skin is white, practically translucent, and the ink stands out in stark shocking black. On his wrist, the first thing Sam saw, an abstract half-sun radiates out from the cluster of veins standing out blue in the center, in a place it’d be neatly hidden as long as his cuffs were buttoned—which they always are, because Dean doesn’t do sloppy. The sun’s rays reach only a few inches up his wrist and it’s relatively small, as far as tattoos go, except—there’s another.

“Is that a sigil?” Sam says, finally.

Dean nods, stretching his arm out a little further. “In that compendium of angelic lore, the really old one in Hebrew that was sent to us from Be’er Sheva,” he says. His voice is very quiet, under the shaking hum of the washing machine. “There was old art, carvings they’d found in temples from thousands of years ago. A sigil to banish angels.”

It’s tucked up into the pit of Dean’s elbow, this ink a red so dark that Sam wouldn’t be able to tell it wasn’t black, if Dean weren’t so pale. It’s—odd-looking, almost unsettling, sharp angles and almost crude shapes, the circle spanning the width of his forearm. Sam recognizes some of them as Enochian, which is as good a sign as any that it’s a true warding, not just weird art. “There hasn’t been a confirmed sighting of an angel in—forever,” Sam says, and immediately feels stupid, but there’s just—too much. What the hell.

Dean covers the sigil with his right hand, shrugging, his thumb brushing over his bicep. His sleeve moves, just slightly, and Sam sees that there’s yet more ink further up, something he can’t yet see, and he says, “Okay, hold on.” He shoves a hand through his hair. “I don’t—get it, what—” He shakes his head, lets out an almost-laugh. “What did you do?”

There’s a moment, where Dean just looks at the floor. “Laundry,” he says, finally, and gathers up the pile of pants and dark sweaters and shoves them into another washing machine. He inputs the cycle and slots in the quarters himself, this time. Sam grabs the softer darks and fills up the third machine, and while he’s doing it Dean says, quietly, “I was doing a research project.”

Sam sits in one of the hard-backed plastic chairs, and Dean tilts his wrist up and looks at it, rubbing his thumb over the delicate lines of the sun’s rays. Slowly, the story starts to come out. How there was always work for the Letters to do, and Dean always liked digging into the lore, finding helpful
spells to send on to field operatives and finding new translations, new intricacies to the knowledge the Men of Letters compiled in the bunker’s library. He had his own interests, though, and when there was time, over the years, he’d been working something out.

“We learn spells, all the time,” Dean says, and now that he’s really going there’s more life to him, his hands shaping the air as he talks. “But they’re all—you know, incantation, words of power, combining components right now. I started thinking, what if there were spells you didn’t need to cast in the moment, you know. Something you could carry with you.”

Sam rubs his jaw, trying to follow the train of thought. “Like—what, like a trueborn witch? So the power is there just by reaching for it?” It would be amazing, if that were possible—and hunting would be about fifty times easier, he thinks.

Dean shakes his head, though. “That amount of power—no, I don’t think that could be possible, not without…” He shakes his head again, and then taps the sun on his wrist. “I mean—I wondered, if you could seal the components, seal the spell, somehow. Tap the power that we all use, just that little bit when we’re casting—but all the time.”

It was a long, long project, he says, and Sam can imagine. Digging through old research, theses of Men of Letters dead and gone. There were magisterios in the branch in Buenos Aires who spent all their time studying magic, but what information the Latin American leadership was willing to share with their cousins in the States was minimal, at best, and not what Dean was looking for, besides. The European organization shared more, but their research was more to do with monsters and history than anything in the world of theory that Dean needed. There was a lot of time to kill, though, and Dean had an eye for making use of all the many, many things he’d learned over the years—teaching Sam, covering for their dad, assisting. He’d been in the heart of all their knowledge his whole life, practically, and he’d always liked figuring out how things worked—and even more, he liked building things to work better.

He pulls up the sleeve of his undershirt, after a while, shows yet another inked-in sigil covering his bicep. This one is a variation on the Aquarian star—thicker lines, sharper angles, drawn around a solid black flower in its heart. It’s cool looking, kind of, Sam thinks. Completely out of place on his nerdy brother. “First one I came up with,” Dean says, dragging a thumb over the flower. “Spent enough time drawing the damn thing, I figured it was my best chance of actually managing to do one that worked.”

He had to practice, before he did anything, though. He ordered the equipment from a website, using their dad’s personal card, the one that Dean always managed so that it looked like the warder was actually in the bunker and not haring across half the country. Working out the spells took a long time, but it was only half the battle—actually getting them onto the body, sealing them under the skin, required a different kind of work.

“Wait,” Sam says, dumping the whites into the first available dryer. “Wait, so—you did that yourself?”

Dean shrugs. “Not like there’s a tattoo parlor in the county,” he says, and it’s such an echo of Sam’s earlier thought that he has to laugh. Dean frowns. “Anyway, it’s not like I could ask some stranger to speak the incantations, or work under the full moon, or anything.”

Sam stares. “Under the full moon,” he says.

Dean picks one of Sam’s new hoodies out of the washing machine, checks the washing instructions on the label. “Well, no,” he says. “Turns out that wasn’t required, in the end. But it’d be—weird, to have someone else do it. So I learned how to do it myself.”
On old scraps of leather, it turned out, learning how to keep a steady hand. Then, carefully, with a clean needle, testing on his own skin, making sure he could manage to keep lines straight on the blank canvas of his thigh. Sam winces, at that, and Dean rubs over the thigh in question through his slacks, grimacing. “That sucked,” he admits, but he learned what he could handle. Special inks had to be formulated, and preparations made, and theoretical models worked out, dozens of notebooks full of formulas and runes, hidden in one of the long-unused rooms in the bunker. But then—

“This one was the first,” he says, tracing over the angel banishing sigil on his forearm. “It’s the simplest one, pretty much. Just a drawing, no real magic required, other than the blood.”

Sam, leaning in to examine it, looks up. “What do you mean, the blood?”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Come on, Sammy, how does any spellwork get done? It’s always about the principles of power. Promises, sacrifice, blah blah. The sigil had to be drawn in blood, that’s what the compendium said, and so—”

Sam leans back, and he knows he’s grimacing but he can’t help it. “Oh, gross.” Explains the color, at least.

“It’s not that gross,” Dean says, sighing. “It’s my blood, it’s not like I used someone else’s. Formulated with black pigment, so it’d last longer, but it won’t work without the blood. Then, to activate it, blood from a wound across the fate line, and poof.” He smiles, slightly. “No more angel.”

“And you think that would work,” Sam says, folding his arms. “Against an angel.”

“The theory’s sound,” Dean says. “Not that it’ll matter.” He’s sitting on the folding table, now, and braces his hands against the edge of it, looks down at the sigil marked into his forearm. “But that was how I knew I could do it.”

The Aquarian star with the flower, that was a design from Thelemic belief— “Technically,” Dean says, dumping their clothes from the dryers back into their original bags, “it’s just a unicursal hexagram with a pentagram flower in the middle. The symbolism is pretty obvious.” The divine, plus the pentacle’s five elements, drawn in an unbroken line while the magician chanted with constant breath, proving devotion.

“But what does it do?” Sam says.

Dean shrugs his peacoat on, over the plain white undershirt. “Basically,” he says, picking up his suitcase, “the odds will turn in my favor, sometimes. In theory.”

Sam frowns, hefting his share of the bags. “How could you ever know that’d work?”

Dean bites his lips between his teeth, but Sam can see the start of the smile. “Well,” Dean says. “Back in your apartment, that first night, when you thought I was a burglar? You couldn’t pin me, could you.”

“Wait,” Sam says, but Dean’s already leaving the laundromat, starting back across the street to the motel. It’s nearly night, and cars are starting to arrive at the motel, but the street’s still pretty quiet in this shabby little neighborhood. He stands there on the sidewalk, thinking back—Dean was slippery, but then they’d wrestled together when they were kids, and Dean usually could pin him, at least while he was still taller. Plus, Sam was out of practice, and Dean had always kept up the exercise regimen Dad had brought back from the Marines with him, so—

“Hey, buddy,” Sam hears, and the guy from the dry cleaner is leaning out the front door, frowning at him. “Are you gonna pick up these suits, or what.”
“Right,” Sam says, “sorry,” and then he’s spent nearly the last of the meager remains of his bank account, and he trudges across the nearly empty street with the plastic bags and laundry clutched awkwardly to his chest, still thinking, trying to figure it out.

The motel room is nearly dark, the curtains still drawn and just the one lamp providing any light. “Thanks for the help,” Sam says, dumping all of the bags onto his bed when he finally fumbles his way inside, and Dean smiles at him, draping his coat over the chair. “I don’t buy it, though. How could you know, if it worked? The luck? Because—I mean, that’s one of the oldest stories, always. If you rely on luck, it never comes, or it bites you in the ass. That’s, like, rule number one.”

“Dude, I know that,” Dean says. He tugs his sleeve up, rolls his thumb over the five-petaled flower. “And that’s not the point of the spell, anyway. ‘Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law,’ it says. I’m just making my own help, so that my will is done. It can’t work all the time, and I can’t rely on it, but—sometimes, maybe. A little extra push. That’s all you need.”

Sam shakes his head, and he’s not doing much to hide how skeptical he is, because Dean rolls his eyes. “You still don’t think I know what I’m doing?” he says.

“It’s not that,” Sam says, though—okay, that’s what it sounds like.

“You always were such a nitpicker,” Dean says, and then he twists his wrist up, and while Sam watches with a frown, Dean places his middle and ring fingers in the center of the sun’s delicate outer curve, and then traces them out over the arc to the bottom line in a smooth move, and draws them back in toward the center, right against the line of his watch, and then he says, quiet, “Lux,” and swiftly draws the two fingers over the cluster of veins and out to the sun’s rays and as he does, immediately, the room fills with light.

“Shit!” Sam says, throwing a hand up in front of his eyes. It’s blinding, brilliant, a shock of pure-white that blasts out from Dean’s hand, fills the room through to the corners and blasts away the shadows. Sam squeezes his eyes shut tight, afterimages shattering all over the inside of his eyelids, and even so it’s—insanely bright.

“Sorry,” Dean says, and behind Sam’s closed eyes the light goes dimmer, and dimmer again, and when he risks looking, blinking tears away, Dean’s still holding his wrist out but it’s a lower glow—still pure white, but not something that burns. Dean shrugs one shoulder. “Didn’t mean to blind you,” he says, sort of contrite, but there’s another tiny smile in the corner of his mouth and Sam’s pretty sure he didn’t exactly not mean to, either. Never let it be said that his brother can’t be petty.

Still—“That’s—amazing,” Sam says, and he’s telling the truth. He steps forward and plays his fingers over the wash of light, looks at how his hand doesn’t start to make a shadow over Dean’s. “Can I touch?” he says, glancing up at Dean, and Dean blinks, and then nods, and so Sam carefully puts his fingers against Dean’s skin, and it just feels—normal. Plain, soft, living skin, no extra heat and nothing to indicate the magic pouring out of it. He traces his thumb over the lines of the tattoo, just barely visible now that the light’s dimmer, and then wraps his hand all the way around Dean’s wrist, covering it, and that finally covers up the light. “Wow.”

When he looks up, Dean’s slightly pink-cheeked, his teeth in his lip. Sam lets go and the soft light pours out again. “How do you change it?” Sam says, fascinated.

“Just—thinking it, basically,” Dean says, and the light gets a tiny bit brighter, and then softens almost to nothing. “Facta est lux,” he says, and the light extinguishes—the lines of the tattoo burn bright white, just for a moment, and then fade down to black again. Perfectly ordinary.

“Wow,” Sam says again, and Dean smiles at him, almost—shy, kind of. Now that the room is lit
again just by the lamp in the corner, it feels very dark, and Sam flicks on the bathroom light with a
hum of fluorescent tubing, lets the white light of it pour into the room and brighten it. Not nearly as
much as Dean had. “Okay, you win,” Sam says, and turns to find Dean sitting on the edge of the
table. “At least one out of three works, I admit it.”

Dean opens his mouth, and closes it again. “Um,” he says.

Sam frowns. “What?”

“Well,” Dean starts. He licks his lips, and then shrugs and mutters, “Screw it, I was gonna talk to you
about this one anyway,” and pulls his undershirt off and over his head in a single move.

Sam sits down on the foot of the nearer bed. Dean’s shoulders are broad, have been ever since he hit
that last growth spurt when he was eighteen, but he’s slender, muscles light on his frame, his skin
white from always being hidden from the sun. Perfect canvas for the ink all over his torso. Over the
top of his chest, scrolling in two sweeping arcs under his collarbones, is a thick line of dark Celtic
knotwork. It scrolls in from fine points under the furthest edge of the collarbone, widening to about
two inches thick where it stops on either side under the hollow of his throat, dipping to a tiny sharp
point on both sides of his sternum. Lower, in the center of his chest right between his pecs—a
pentagram of some kind, surrounded by a continuous ring of abstract flames. And then, below—

“What the hell,” Sam says.

Dean gets to his feet, turns a little toward the light from the bathroom for a better view. Maybe not
slender—skinny is the word that comes to mind, now, his ribs standing out, just a little. Over them,
though, under the line of his pecs, layers and layers of… flowers, bright and colorful in contrast to all
the black ink. Red poppies, Sam recognizes, and green leaves of groundsel, and tiny bloodroot
blossoms, their white petals standing out with their clusters of golden stamens.

“It’s for healing,” Dean says, passing his hands over the tattoo. It’s big enough that his hands don’t
hide it; it covers the full bottom half of his ribcage, flowers in multiple sizes spattered over his skin,
leaves winding between them. It’s split into two symmetrical pieces, like the knotwork above, a bare
line of white skin separating the flowers as they spread out to frame the lower half of his stomach.
Peeking out between the petals is some kind of text, black and intricate—Tamil script, Sam
recognizes, after a long moment of staring. “I haven’t gotten sick,” Dean says, quietly. “Since I
finished it. And, look.”

He holds out his hands, and for a second Sam doesn’t get it. “Blisters are gone,” Dean says, and—
oh. He’s right. His skin is pale, and perfect, like nothing happened, when Sam’s palms are still pink
and tender.

“What’s the knotwork for?” Sam says. Of the thousand questions he could ask, that one feels safest.

“Protection,” Dean says. He runs a thumb over the scroll under his left collarbone, grimaces just a
little. “Took forever, had to do it in the mirror and not accidentally reverse the runes.”

Sam stands up, takes a closer look. Runes—yeah, christ, that is the design. Tiny runes, wrapped over
and around each other through the knotwork, and when he squints he recognizes a repeating pattern.
“Is that Norse?”

“Hey, he remembers,” Dean says, and Sam glances up to find Dean grinning at him, almost fond.
“The runes are. The spell—I kind of… engineered it myself, from Scots Gaelic. ‘The bones of my
fathers are my shield’.” He twists the silver ring on his right hand, the one passed down from their
late grandfather, to their mom, down to Dean. “The Campbells were from Scotland, seemed
appropriate. But, god, it really took forever.” He shakes his head. “Between making the ink for the
flowers to infuse the spellwork with the kinds of magic I needed and etching in each link of the
runes, that was a long year.”

Sam frowns. “When did you finish?”

“These two?” Dean puts a hand to his covered ribs, obviously counting back in his head. “Uh—this
May, I guess. When the purple anemone finally bloomed and I finished the last piece of the healing
spell.”

Sam huffs a laugh, runs a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe Dad let you do this,” he says,
shaking his head. “If I’d ever even mentioned wanting a tattoo, much less a magic tattoo, he’d have
taken my head off.”

Dean looks up at Sam, and then away, at the floor. “Yeah,” he says, after a weird pause. He starts to
explain a little more—the inks all had to be handmade for the healing spell, each flower layered
carefully on over the top of a reworked prayer to the Ashwini Kumaras—but he’s looking down, a
little quieter. Sam takes a step back, takes it in, now that he’s not so surprised. The tattoos aren’t huge
—there’s plenty of space left, his shoulders and pecs and belly bare, and the left arm’s ink is neatly
spaced, high on the bicep to the top of the forearm to the small sun on the inside of his wrist. All of
them done with clean, perfect lines, and also—completely hidden, when Dean’s wearing his normal
clothes, not a trace of them peeking out at collar or cuffs.

“Dean,” Sam says, interrupting midflow while Dean rambles about the difficulty of extracting ichor
from figwort. “What did Dad say, about the tattoos?”

Dean licks his lips, and opens his mouth—and closes it again.

“Oh my god,” Sam says. They’ve always known how to lie, they’ve done it their whole lives to
everyone they’ve ever met, but Dean always was bad at lying to Sam, who’s grown up knowing his
tells—and worse now, since he’s out of practice. “Dad doesn’t know, does he.”

In return, he gets another pause, and then a little tight shrug, Dean crossing his arms loosely over his
bare chest. “It just—never came up,” he says, weakly.

Sam drops down to the bed again, the cheap mattress creaking under his weight. “Wow,” he says,
but it’s for a different reason this time. “How the hell did you hide this, man? I mean—PT! Even if
you just ran into each other in the shower room, you’d have to have bandages on while they were
healing, right? He never noticed?”

Dean says, “Guess not,” and goes over to the bed where all their laundry’s dumped into a pile, starts
sorting through it. His shoulders are hunched in a little, now, and he looks—more naked, awkward,
in his belted slacks and nothing else.

A door slams, muffled, somewhere further down the building. Sam stares at Dean. “Hang on,” he
says, slow. “The banishment sigil was first, you said, and that was—two years ago, nearly.” Dean
shakes out one of his dress shirts, the blue, and starts folding it neatly on the mattress, his movements
quick and precise. He’s not looking at Sam, but Sam can do the math on his own. “Dean. Has Dad
—what the hell.”

“What?” Dean says, but he’s balling socks and not looking up and doing a really awful job of
pretending like it’s no big deal, and Sam says, the thought of it still forming at the back of his mind,
“Has Dad not been home? This whole time?”
“Of course not, don’t be ridiculous,” Dean says, tossing another pair of socks down onto the bed. “He needs research and supplies and stuff, Sam, he has to come back sometimes.”

“Supplies,” Sam says, and Dean glances up at his tone of voice. He takes a deep breath. “Okay. But you’ve—you’ve been working on this massive project, and it never came up, somehow, and he never noticed. Dad, of all people. Are you kidding me?”

“Okay, this is why—” Dean shakes his head and rubs a quick hand over his face. At least he’s dropping the laundry pretense. “I didn’t want to talk about this, I knew it’d just get you started.”

Sam stares. “Get me started?” he says. Dean looks up, resigned. Resigned, like it’s all so much spilled milk. “How long was he gone?”

Sure enough, Dean says, “It’s not a big deal.”

He goes over to the table and picks up his undershirt, pulls it back on in quick agitated jerks and hides all that ink. “Dean,” Sam starts, and Dean only shakes his head, grabs the dry cleaning bags and starts taking off the plastic, and Sam can only think about—all those nights in the empty bunker when they were kids. Just the two of them, growing up together and studying and training, target practice, arguing about what to have for dinner, foot races in the empty night to the end of the warding on the property, but it was the two of them. They were together, watching out for each other, and even so, even when Dad or one of the interning adepts trying to earn his next ranking was around, the corridors were long, and empty, and the rooms echoing and dark. Even with someone at his side Sam almost went crazy, underground, and to be alone—

“I can’t believe him,” Sam says. His voice is too loud, but so what. Dean puts his jacket down on the table, deliberately, starts folding it into the neat tucks that won’t let it wrinkle in his bag. “So, what, it was—phone calls? Fetch this, do that, stay put in case I need you?”

Dean doesn’t look up, rolling his blue silk tie over his unmarred palm. “At least he called,” he says.

It’s not said sharply—he just lays it in the room between them, and Sam closes his mouth. Dean shakes out Sam’s new coat, folds it in practiced motions against his chest, and Sam stands up, goes to the window and pushes the curtain open, looks out at the still night. A few more cars rolling down the street, a woman and her kid going into the laundromat hauling trash bags of clothes. The world ticking along. It always does.

There’s a sigh, behind him. “It’s not—look. It’s fine, okay.” Another rustle of plastic and cloth. Dean still tidying up, like always. “I’m twenty-six, Sam, I don’t need babysitting. The work in the bunker, it’s important.”

Sam braces his hands on the window sill. “Yeah, you keep saying that.”

“Look,” Dean says, and then: “No, really, turn around. Look.” Sam drags a hand over his face, and does, planting his ass on the sill. Dean’s lifting his undershirt, high enough that Sam can see the relatively simple pentagram tattoo, right in the center of his chest. “This one, see? It’s what I wanted to tell you about in the first place. This—I just did this, just before I left Lebanon to come find you. I took the design from some Babylonian charms we had in the vaults.” He taps the pentacle with two fingers, looking down at the design. “It’s—for hunters. For the hunt. I thought, maybe Dad would...”

He shakes his head, firms his mouth. Meets Sam’s eyes. “I put it on when I knew I was going to leave the wards, and you should have it, too. Whatever did this, it’s dangerous. If it’s a demon—if what killed Mom, and Jennifer, is a demon, then it has to possess someone to work on the physical plane.”
Sam folds his arms over his chest. “I know how demons work, Dean.”

“Okay, but look—this can stop it.” Dean drops his shirt, takes a step closer. “It protects the body from possession. They can’t take the wearer to use as a vessel, can’t use them to hurt anyone else. This isn’t theory, Sam, this is historical fact. The pentagram and the flames, as long as it was touching skin, a person would be safe. This is more permanent than a charm—it can keep you safe, while you’re hunting.” He smiles, sort of, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Wish I’d known you were going to be hunting when you left. I’d have done the research earlier.”

“You—” Sam shakes his head. “Are you, what? Offering to give me a tattoo?”

“I just want to help,” Dean says, more quietly. “I—I get it, okay. This thing needs to pay, I understand. I’m not trying to get in your way. But this, the lore, figuring out how to use it, it’s what I’m good at. This is how I can help.”

Sam drags both hands through his hair, laces his fingers together behind his neck. “A demon, huh.” He closes his eyes. “That’s really what you think it is?”

“I don’t know.” There’s a creak, Dean sitting on the mattress. “Dad never really—he didn’t want to talk to me about it, much. But the things he’d have me look up, the rituals and stuff he’d research. I think that’s what he thinks it is. But who knows, it could be—a powerful witch with a vendetta, or something. Someone after our family.”

“What did we ever do wrong,” Sam says, dropping his hands against his thighs, and when he looks up Dean’s sitting on the end of one of the beds, watching him.

“We need to find Dad.” Dean says, after a moment. His hands sit knotted loosely in his lap, one thumb rubbing idly at his platinum ring. “One way or another. That’s the priority. But if you’re going to be out in the world, trying to track this thing down, you’ve got to be safe.”

“I was out for years,” Sam says, not that Dean needs the reminder. “Traveling, hunting. Didn’t see a single demon, didn’t even run into anything worse than a ghoul.”

“That you know of,” Dean says, and it’d be the same paranoid crap Dad always fed them, but then Dean gestures at the dingy motel room, at Sam’s pile of new secondhand clothes. Everything he owns, now. Dean licks his lips, shrugs. “Things are different.”

For the smallest moment, Sam gets an intense sense-memory of the heat, the dry scorching air rolling over his skin. The fire bursting forth. Not just a poltergeist, or a ghost. Something stronger, more dangerous, and the motel room seems for a second smaller, the night pressing in close against the glass. He stands up straight, off the sill, and presses a hand against his chest. Tries to imagine it. “Does it have to be a tattoo?” he says, finally.

“Does it have to be a tattoo?” he says, finally. “If you’re not a wuss.”

Sam rolls his eyes. “Whatever,” he says, but the tension in his stomach eases, if only just a little. At least Dean’s willing to help. There’s so much more to discuss, so much still to plan, but this is a start. He takes a deep breath, and looks Dean in the eyes. “So. How do we do this?”

The shower in the motel doesn’t suck, which is a pleasant surprise. With the water on full blast he can’t hear the irritating hum of the fluorescents, and even if the showerhead isn’t tall enough—they never are—the water’s hitting him like a jet, right between the shoulderblades. Hallelujah for motels
too decrepit to bother with flow restrictors, he thinks, and lets his head sink low between his shoulders, just stands there for a while. It’s been a long day.

Dean said they’d be able to use any tattoo gun for this one, no special spells or ink required, and so he’s out in the room looking up tattoo parlors in the yellow pages, looking for any that are closed on a Sunday night. Sam shakes his head, just thinking about it. His mild-mannered nerdy brother, a budding tattoo artist, planning a b&e. And Jenn thought he’d been too shy to function.

The grief hits him like a shock, low in the stomach like a punch. Fuck, Jenn. He puts a hand against the cold tile wall, the sound of the water rushing loud in his ears. God, it was only—he’s been distracting himself, all day. Cranked the radio loud when he was driving, rushing back into the investigation, filling the hours up with the stupid everyday normal crap that makes up living, and what good did it do. She’s gone, and he’s never again going to see—

He bites the inside of his cheek, deliberate, trying to stave them off but they’re rushing in on him anyway. All these memories. Stupid things, small things. Picking long strands of red hair off of their own shower walls, trying to keep her from plugging up the drain again. Arguing about where to go for dinner, because she wanted Korean and he didn’t want to go to Kimchi Time again. The little wrinkle-nosed smile she’d point at him when she wanted something, putting on the cute little girlfriend schtick when it was a lie, because she was just as sharp-tongued as ever, and he puts his hand over his eyes, hunches down into the stream of the water and feels his lips draw back, uncontrollable, heat rising up hard and fast into his sinuses. He takes in a breath, chest shaking, and forces himself not to sob. He squeezes at his temples and says, out loud, “She’s dead,” and his voice isn’t much but he still heard it.

It’s more real here in this cramped little shower than it was in the graveyard this morning. Than it was last night, among all those murmuring strangers, the box looming shiny white at the front of that weird dim room. The photograph of her smiling, propped up on the casket lid.

He breathes, in and out, slowly steadying, and then turns around and bends at the waist to stick his head under the stream of water, scrubs hard at his scalp and then his face. She’s gone, just like Mom before her, and the Winchesters have never been the type to sit around feeling sorry for themselves when there’s work to do. He’s going to get his revenge—for himself, for her. For all of them. It’s the only thing worth doing. It’s all there is left to do.

He turns off the shower, dries off. He’d avoid his eyes in the mirror but it’s fogged up, anyway. All the better. He tugs on freshly washed boxers, jeans, pulls a t-shirt over his wet hair, and he’s scrunching on the new black hoodie when he opens the bathroom door, lets the steam flood out into the colder room. “So, what’s the plan?” he says, dragging the zip up. The room’s tidied, the freshly washed clothes seemingly stowed away into their bags, and he looks up and finds Dean sitting at the small table, head in his hands as he stares down at their dad’s journal, spread open before him.

Sam stands stock-still. He forgot. Shit, he forgot, and Dean says, his voice very flat, “Found this in your bag, when I was putting away your stuff.”

“Dean,” Sam says, and then—god, what is there to say.

Dean slides a piece of paper out from below the leather cover, scuffing over the laminate table. “So, Dad did leave instructions, then,” he says. Sam bites his lips between his teeth. The letter—that stupid letter, and he’d meant to share it with Dean, he really had, but the hunt came first. Dean taps at something on the paper. “It says, do not open, but I guess that didn’t stop you, did it, Sam.”

“I needed to figure out what it was,” Sam says, and Dean closes his eyes for a second, shakes his head. “Dean, that letter—"
“When did you get it?” Dean says, and there’s a snap to his voice that makes Sam’s mouth clack shut. Dean looks up at him, and he’s flushed red, his jaw clenched square and tight. “You kept saying you were sure he was alive. What? Have you had it this whole time?”

“No! They—they gave it me at the chapterhouse, when I went back.” He gestures at the letter. “The porter gave me the package and I opened it, yeah, but—it didn’t change anything. We still needed to finish up the hunt. People were in trouble, Dean.”

“And you didn’t think to mention it,” Dean says. He’s staring at Sam, his arms folded tight over his chest. He’s in a clean button-down, again, closed up neat at throat and wrists, all his secrets re-hidden under armor. “When it was over. You thought, hey, I’ll make Dean do this, and then I’ll—what, screw around for a few days, make me think he was dead—”

“No,” Sam says again, and takes a step forward, his hands spread out. “No, Dean, I swear, I didn’t mean to—we needed to finish that hunt, that’s true. I didn’t think you’d keep going, before the body dropped at the inn. But I was going to tell you, I just—we were looking for him, we called all those places, and there was no trace, and I just couldn’t figure out a way to bring it up, not yet. I just—it slipped my mind, that’s all.”

Dean shoves up to his feet, the chair juddering across the thin carpet. “Yeah, you forgot,” he says, sarcasm dropping heavily onto the words. “You’re really good at forgetting, Sam.”

Sam sucks in a breath, his face going hot. “Something happened,” he says, his voice distant, and Dean’s expression changes.

“I know,” Dean says. He takes a step away, puts his hand on the chair back. “You had a day, though. A whole day. You couldn’t put me out of my misery?”

“And tell you what?” Dean’s eyes go narrow and Sam spreads his hands out, gesturing uselessly at the letter. “That he left, on his own? That he ditched you to go follow some lead, and still wouldn’t trust you with what it was? You would’ve left, you would’ve gone back to the bunker just like he told you, and then what? We did something good, in Portsmouth, and it’s more than any one of the Letters would’ve done.”

Dean’s face is blotchy, now—red high along his cheeks, the rest of him pale. He looks furious, more than Sam has ever seen him, and that’s fine—Sam’s mad, too. “You always do this,” Dean says, and he’s clenching his fists, his voice shaky. “You always talk like, we can’t do anything right, like we’re the—source of all evil in the world, or something. You think some random hunter would’ve put that case together, fixed everything, saved the day?”

Sam wants to hit something. “I did,” he says, almost shouting. Dean blinks, rocking back a little, and Sam—he sucks a breath in through his teeth, blows it out sharp and short. “We did, Dean. You and me. We actually did something, and who knows who might have died if we didn’t. That maid you met? The hotel manager?”

Dean shakes his head. “You should have told me,” he says. He has both hands on the chair back now, leaning against it with his shoulders high, tight. He shakes his head. “I kept thinking, he’s been out, hunting, somewhere without anyone helping him. We were going to call some morgue, and—”

He cuts himself off, there. Sam runs a hand through his hair. “But we didn’t,” he says. “He goes off alone all the time, and he’s always fine.” Dean looks at the floor, and Sam chews the inside of his cheek, breathes out slow for a second. “I was worried, okay. I was, really, because that—that letter, that’s not how I’ve ever heard Dad sound, you know? I thought something bad might have happened.”
Dean’s hands are tight on the chair, the knuckles white with tension. Sam folds his arms over his chest, lets the silence sit for a second. He didn’t mean it to happen like this, but he should—he should be honest, now that it’s out. He owes Dean that much.

“I don’t know any more than you do, man, but—we looked. We asked, all those police stations and hospitals, and we never found him. I think he’s just off hunting. Same thing we’re looking for.”

“The demon,” Dean says, to his feet.

“Or whatever it is,” Sam says. He swallows. “Dean.” Dean looks up. His jaw’s still set, his mouth a firm line, but his color has faded, at least a little. “I swear. I was going to tell you.”

Dean doesn’t say anything, doesn’t respond, beyond cutting his eyes to the open journal, splayed open on the table, open to some page filled edge to edge with dense, neat handwriting, a newspaper article taped in close against the spine. “You need that tattoo,” Dean says, unexpectedly. Sam frowns. “I haven’t had a chance to read the whole thing, but I looked at the last couple of entries. Dad knows what he’s doing, and he’s noticed portents, patterns. More and more, over the last few years.”

“You think it’s something to do with what killed Jenn?” Sam says, entirely diverted. If that’s true, if there’s a pattern—

“I don’t know,” Dean says, flatly. He grabs his coat off the other chair, shrugs into it in short, sharp movements. “You need that tattoo,” he repeats, and for a second he sounds like their dad, voice crisp and brooking absolutely no argument. Sam’s chest flinches, an argument already rising up his throat just out of reflex, except—Dean looks directly at him, face set and blank and yet—weary, almost. Expecting the squabble. Sam swallows down everything he could say. Nods. Dean nods back, and gathers up Sam’s new coat, and tosses it at his chest. Sam catches it, barely. “There’s a place close by. I called, no answer. Should be fine.”

“Fine,” Sam manages, his hands tight in the coat.

Dean picks the keys up off the table, flips the journal closed. “Okay,” he says, and shoves his hands deep into his pockets, and meets Sam’s eyes. “What are we waiting for?”

It’s not that late, really, not even nine o’clock, but the shop Dean picked is completely dark, just another shadowy storefront on a dark street. It’s cold, the air damp and laying thick chill on the back of Sam’s neck as they trudge along the sidewalk, the Impala parked a safe distance away. He leads the way past the shop, then down into the alley between it and the also-shuttered pet store next door, and there are no homeless people tucked back here, no witnesses, and the streetlights are dim and don’t reach back here anyway, so it’s nice and private when they come up on the tiny back door, next to the dumpster. A quick flash of Sam’s pocket flashlight finds the lines going the electric box and the old Bell box, right next to it. It’s the work of a moment to pry it open, to find and cut the outgoing line. No real security for the security, but he didn’t expect anything more—who breaks into a tattoo parlor, after all.

By the time he’s got his knife folded back into his pocket, Dean already has the door open. “Another spell?” Sam says, softly, following him into the pitch-dark interior. He didn’t hear anything.

“I can pick a lock, Sam.” Dean flicks on his own flashlight and holds his hand cupped half over the beam, just illuminating his feet as he picks his way into the narrow hallway they find themselves in.
No alarm going off, and Sam finds the cheap wall-mounted panel, its screen flashing a little ERR message but not sending out an alert. Perfect. The main room is open, the barred windows at the front big and wide and uncovered, presumably so passers-by can watch customers getting inked on the wide chairs out front. There’s a big privacy screen toward the back, though, and another chair there. Sam unfolds the screen, makes a space big enough that they won’t be seen from the street if someone randomly walks by, while Dean rustles around behind the counter. In the tiny supply closet, among the disinfectant and cleaning supplies, Sam finds a few fat candles. Should be enough to see by, and not call attention.

Three candles on the shelf right by the chair, and in the little private space made by the screen there’s a soft glow, steady and subtle. He shrugs off his coat, slings it over the foot of the chair. It’s cold in here.

“Got the ink,” Dean says. Sam turns around and Dean’s standing there in the near-dark. He holds up a little black pot, a handful of plastic packages in his other hand. He nods at the chair, voice clipped even with him being quiet. “I’ll get the gun ready. Sit down, get your shirt off.”

Sam wants to snap back. He licks his lips, bites them, and unzips his hoodie instead, tugs it off and his t-shirt over his head. Goosebumps race immediately over his back and shoulders and he shivers hard, but he sits down in the stupid chair, anyway, sinks back against the cold vinyl. Dean’s doing something next to him, sitting in the little rolling chair, but Sam just looks up at the dim ceiling. There’s art up there, and covering the walls all around, but he can’t really see it.

“Where’s it going to go?” he says, when the silence has stretched out a little too long.

“Same place as mine,” Dean says. He rolls closer, and turns Sam in his chair so that the candlelight is to his right side, Dean leaning over his left. He touches the spot right in the center of Sam’s bare torso, at the base of the sternum just before it turns into his stomach. His fingers are cold and Sam’s skin flinches, his belly clenching, and Dean glances up at him, just a gleam of his eyes in the dark before he turns away, starts fiddling with the gun. “Hard to see, hard to get at. It can go anywhere as long as it’s on unbroken skin, but this spot works as well as anywhere.”

There’s a loud jittering hum, then—the gun spinning to life. Sam takes a deep breath, tries to calm down. Dean rolls in close and lowers the angle of Sam’s chair so he’s nearly laid out flat, the candlelight flickering over his bare skin. The little pot of black ink gets set down on his chest, like he’s a table, and Dean lays a bare hand flat on his stomach, almost soothing. “Deep breath,” Dean says, meeting his eyes. “And then don’t move.”

Sam nods, breathes in, and then the gun’s making its rattling noise again and—ah, ow. “Shit,” he says, on half a breath. Dean spreads the skin tight between thumb and forefinger, steadily dragging the needles along, and it’s like—a shaving cut, a fine razor dragging just that bit too hard, a cat-scratch nagging pain. It burns, and he closes his eyes, tries to keep his breathing shallow and even so he won’t mess up the lines. “How long is this gonna take?” he says.

“An hour, maybe,” Dean says, sounding distracted. He dabs at Sam’s skin, keeps working. “This one’s not complicated, I just need to get the lines right.”

“Oh, good.” Sam folds his hands tight around the arms of the chair. How do people get addicted to this, it’s awful. “How did you stand doing this to yourself?” he says. “You didn’t mess up?” There’s no answer for a moment, just the irritating noise of the stupid gun, and Sam scrunches his eyes tighter closed, bites the inside of his lip, and then says, “Come on, man, distract me. Please.”

There’s a pause in the needles digging into him, if only briefly, and then the scratching starts again. “I practiced on my leg, I told you,” Dean says, finally. His voice isn’t quite as sharp. “No ink, but
just doing lines, curves, getting used to it. Bled a lot, but it worked. My hand’s steady.’” There’s another little pause, when he dips for more ink. “Gotta say, it’s easier on someone else.”

Tiny whisper of humor there, and Sam groans. “This sucks,” he says, and opens his eyes again, looks down to find Dean focused on his work, but the corner of his mouth is turned up. “You suck,” Sam amends, and drops his head back down.

“Baby,” Dean says, mild, and keeps working around the edge of the flames.

Quiet, then, but for the buzzing. Sam turns his head, looks at the candles, with their steady high flames. He breathes through the pain, which isn’t getting better in the slightest, and then says, trying not to overthink it, “I’m sorry.”

The gun lifts off his chest for a few seconds. Tap of the needles into the ink. “Let’s not, Sam,” Dean says, and it’s not sharp anymore but it is—tired, and Sam closes his eyes as the needles dig back in, the gun whining and buzzing away.

“It was important,” Sam says, anyway. The damn tattoo was Dean’s idea in the first place, he’s the one insisting; he’s not going to walk off and leave it half-finished, so Sam’s got him trapped here. For now, at least. “The hunt. People were in danger.”

“I know that,” Dean says. Sam glances down and Dean’s still working, still focused. The tiny tip of smile is gone. “I don’t know if you remember, but I agreed with you. I worked the case, too.”

“I know,” Sam says. The thrill of it is still there, when he thinks back to the graveyard—burning the bastard, saving the day with Dean at his side. There’s a bigger ache, though, in the pit of his chest. He can’t put it off, can’t turn it aside, and when he closes his eyes—the splat of blood on the wood floor. The flames leaping up, her eyes dark and shocked and empty, staring into his. The needles lift away and the buzzing cuts off, and in the sudden silence he takes a deep breath. “I have to hunt this thing, Dean. It’s—all I can think about.”

When he looks, Dean’s focused on the gun, doing something with the needles. He doesn’t respond, and Sam lifts up on his elbows, wincing as the movement pulls on the tender skin of his chest. “Dad’s been hunting it, too, you know he has,” Sam says, more urgent. “All those trips. All the research. He’s not just in libraries, at chapterhouses. We’ve got the journal, now, and he’s following some big lead, disappearing somewhere. And with—with what happened, just like what happened to Mom. Something big is coming.”

Dean pauses, licks his lip and then bites it. “Lay back down,” he says, after a few seconds. His hand presses down, framing the shape of the tattoo, and Sam lets himself be pushed. Dean pats his chest, once, and the gun starts up its buzzy hum again, a thicker cluster of needles pulsing into his skin. A different kind of sting—less painful, more burning. It’s another minute, almost, before Dean speaks again. “So, what are you picturing, here? That we’ll find Dad, and he’ll just let us join him?” He glances up at Sam’s face, back to the work he’s doing. “He wanted us safe, away from all this. That’s why he wanted us in the bunker in the first place.”

“Well, we’re not in the bunker,” Sam says. A car drives by, outside, and the room fills up with bright headlights that fade away just as quick. Dean’s biting his lip again. “We deserve to be on this hunt, too. Jenn, and Mom. I want to take out the thing that killed them just as much as he does. Don’t you?”

“Of course I do.” The gun scrapes along his skin, scratching incessantly.

A particularly sharp jab burns deep and Sam breathes through it, says, “Then let’s keep looking for
him, and when we find him, we stay and hunt and we take out whatever bastard did this.”

“Dad’s been looking,” Dean says. “For decades. He hasn’t found it yet.”

“Maybe it’d go faster if he had some help, then,” Sam says, and it’s sharper than he meant it to be. He takes a breath, careful not to move his chest too much, slow and easy. “Dean. I know, the bunker is important to you, and I’m not trying to say—I know that the work you’ve been doing there, it helps.” He tries to smile. “Hell, look at this. A whole new kind of protection, that’s something.”

Dean gives him a look. “Laying it on a little thick there, Sammy,” he says, dry.

Sam shrugs, and Dean flicks him, mutters stay still, keeps working on the damn tattoo. “It’s just, there’s only so much we can do from books. Look at Dad—he’s been out, working, and we’ve been lying to the Letters for—god, as long as I can remember. The real work is out here, man. This is how we’re going to find it.”

“You keep saying that,” Dean says, an irritated edge creeping into his voice. He dips the needles into the ink again, but then lets the gun go quiet. He sits back in his chair, looks directly at Sam with a knot between his eyebrows.

Sam lifts up on one elbow, wincing. “All our lives have been about this thing,” he says. He lifts one shoulder, shaking his head. “Even when we find Dad, that won’t be the end of it. We need to finish it, together.”

Dean blinks, drops his eyes. He adjusts his grip on the gun. “Hunting,” he says. His voice is low.

“It’s better with a partner,” Sam says. He nudges Dean in the arm with his knee, makes him look up again. “Anyway, who better to watch my back than my dorky big brother. You’re practically a mother hen.”

Dean rolls his eyes at that, but Sam’s heart lifts, just a bit. The gun buzzes on again and Sam lies back without needing to be asked, his eyes fixed on Dean’s face. If he’s reading that expression right —

“If I was going to come with you,” Dean starts, and Sam closes his eyes in relief. He’s got him. “We’ve got to make preparations, do it right. I can’t just leave the bunker standing, not without covering with the Letters somehow.”

“We can figure something out,” Sam says, almost lightheaded all of a sudden. Dean’s coming with him, isn’t going to just shove himself down into the dark again. They’ll work together, hunt together, find Dad together. The buzz of the gun rattles through his skin, pinching and burning, and Sam lets his mind drift away from it, making plans, thinking of the supplies they’ll need, the money they’ll have to scrounge up. He needs to brush up on some of the old lore, and Dean needs to learn how to move in the world outside, and then, once they find Dad—

“Okay,” Dean says, and Sam’s eyes shoot open. Dean lays the gun on the tray, dabs at Sam’s skin once last time, and then flicks his flashlight on again, angling the light carefully just at Sam’s chest so they can see clearly. Sam cranesthis neck. The skin’s inflamed, hurting like a son of a bitch, but there it is—a ring of flames, the pentagram star in the center.

“I don’t feel any different,” he says. The lines are clean, as far as Sam can tell, but there’s no sensation of a lock closing on his soul, or anything.

“Surface level only, like I said,” Dean says. He pats the tattoo, two gentle taps, and even that hurts, makes Sam flinch away and clap a protective hand over it. Dean smiles, briefly, and then flicks off
the flashlight. He turns back to the tray, produces a damp clean cloth and hands it to Sam, says, “Careful.”

Sam sits up straight, dabbing away the excess ink and faint dots of blood, while Dean stows the borrowed gun away. His whole chest aches, but—well, it’s not unbearable. Still. He needs a drink.

Dean returns with clean cotton and medical tape, and Sam holds the bandage flat against his chest while Dean tapes the edges down neatly against his skin. When it’s done, Dean scoots back in his chair and waits, and Sam carefully ducks back into his t-shirt, hides the evidence away. He zips up his hoodie, drags on his coat, and the warmth is a relief after so long.

Dean’s turning the roll of tape around and around, a complicated expression on his face. “You’re sure about this?” he says, finally.

There’s only one thing he could be asking about. “I have to,” Sam says, and it—well, it’s as simple and as true as that. Dean looks up at him, but that’s really all there is to say.

They wipe a little for prints, but neither of them have ever been arrested and, anyway, it’s not like they did any damage or stole anything, beyond a few ounces of plain black ink. Dean tucks a twenty under the gun he borrowed, and Sam shakes his head but doesn’t say anything. The chairs go back where they were, and Sam blows out the candles before Dean pushes the privacy screen back against the wall, and then Sam picks his way carefully back into the little hallway in the sudden dark, finds the door.

“Ready to go?” Sam says. They’ll have to hope no one moved into the alley while they were inside, but his chest is so light behind his aching skin that he’s not too worried about it.

Dean comes up beside him, and in the little gleam from the masked flashlight Sam sees him nod. “Yeah,” Dean says. “I’m with you.”

Sam grips his shoulder, just for a moment, and Dean looks up at him, searches his face. He looks down, after a second, but Sam sees the corner of his mouth lift before he turns the collar of his coat up against the coming chill. Sam cracks the door and peeks out, but the coast is clear. Dean re-locks the door behind them and when Sam jerks his head toward the mouth of the alleyway Dean follows, quiet at Sam’s side, shoulder-to-shoulder as they move out together into the night.
Chapter Summary

On their way back to the bunker, Sam and Dean take a detour to Lake Manitoc, Wisconsin, to work a case and test their skills.

November drags along with the days getting colder and the sky greyer, rain turning into sleet and the trees steadily losing all their leaves. They’ve been driving in ever-increasing circles for almost two weeks, leaving Boston and eventually Massachusetts behind. Sam and Dean take turns at the wheel, take turns in small-town libraries with checking local newspapers, police blotters. Their dad is—well. Sam would say he’s a ghost, but he knows better.

It’s slow, and frustrating, but it’s something to at least be moving, with a clear and direct goal: find Dad, and then kill the bad thing. When one of them is driving the other is reading their dad’s journal, and it’s becoming more and more clear that whatever took their mom from them, whatever killed Jennifer, was either a demon or in the employ of a demon. The journal is dense, their dad’s academic scrawl a puzzle, but it’s the biggest window into his head Sam has ever had. He doesn’t know if it’s exactly the same for Dean, but it’s not like Dean’s whiling away his turns in the passenger seat by staring out the window.

There’s no hint of their dad, still, and they’ve gone through whole counties in Connecticut and western New York by the time Dean insists that they start to head back across the country. "We’ve
got to get back to the bunker," he says, while they’re fueling up after another fruitless search in Albany. Sam gives him a warning look, but Dean shakes his head, folded up tight into his coat and looking out at the view of the Hudson. "We should regroup, and there’re things I need to do. We’re going to keep looking."

A long, long drive, then, hugging the northern border down past the Great Lakes, heading back toward the heart of the country. Dean sleeps, a little, when Sam’s driving; when it’s Dean’s turn, Sam doesn’t want to. Every time he closes his eyes there’s just—fire. The dreams won’t go away, no matter how exhausted he is, no matter how many miles they get from Boston and what he lost there. Dean tells him to take the back seat and Sam does, just to pacify him, but instead of sleeping all he does is read. The journal is a lot to take in. They duck past Cleveland and hit the I-80, and while Dean’s getting more comfortable with actually going the speed limit Sam works his way backwards through the clues carefully written into pseudo-code, the hints dropped about what their dad has been hunting, the work he’s done since taking over the bunker when they were both small. Sam’s looking for the big secret, trying to figure out how John Winchester’s mind really works in order to figure out where he’s gone, and he’s so focused that it takes him a while to realize—it’s not only the search for their mom’s murderer that’s in here.

In a speedbump of a town on the near side of Indianapolis, they make a real stop. There’s a shady no-tell that rents them a room for four hours, and Sam can see Dean’s skin practically crawling with disgust but they need a shower, and a real bed, at least for a little while. Sam stares at the ceiling, for too long, but eventually he does get some shut-eye, because he wakes to Dean joggling his socked foot where it’s hanging off the bed. "I’m starving," Dean says, doing a bad job of pretending to ignore the sweat at Sam’s temples, his fast breathing, but Sam’s grateful for it anyway.

"Me, too," Sam says. He sits up and tries to scrub his hair into any semblance of normal, and from how high Dean’s eyebrows get he’s pretty sure it didn’t work. They passed a Walmart on the way into town; Sam stares at the journal where it’s lying on the foot of his still-made bed. He’s been doing some thinking. "We should run a quick errand first," he says to Dean.

Dean makes a pained face, laying a hand exaggeratedly on his stomach. "If I die of hunger, it’s on you," he says, and that makes Sam smile before he holds his hand out for the keys.

It’s only an hour before they’re installed at a diner, exceptionally clean and bright, to make up for the vague grime of the motel and the warehouse feel of the Walmart. The food looks good, and it’s cheap, too, which is a lucky thing because Sam has now officially drained his bank account down to the dregs on two burner cell phones and a cheap but serviceable laptop, which he’s got plugged in under their table as he downloads updates through the diner’s sluggish wifi.

"I don’t know why you need that thing," Dean says, again, as he reads over his menu. "Not like you’re writing treatises or anything."

"Hush," Sam says, absently. Ah—finally, updates finished, and the plain interface loads up enough for him to open the browser and start digging. "Betsy’s got internet, Dean, don’t act like you’re still in 1987."

"Eighty-seven was a good year," Dean says, but before they can start to bicker the plump little waitress appears at their table, smiling professionally even though it’s well after the lunch rush, and that gives Sam the cover to start running a couple of searches, while Dean’s distracted by all of his options.

With the practice over the last few weeks Dean does a decent job of ordering like a normal person—patty melt, salad. Ranch dressing. Sam absent-mindedly copies him as he goes through news websites in the area, searching for anything that looks wrong. Dean’s got an issue of the Indianapolis
Star on his side of the table and, when Sam glances up, he’s reading some story with a frown. The waitress drops off their iced teas with a smile and an especially warm there you go, sir, for Dean, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

"When we get home," Dean says, when she’s gone, "there are a couple of things I need to check on. Before I left I finished a few projects for the chapterhouses in St. Louis and Vancouver, but they might have sent back questions. I need to make sure there aren’t loose ends."

He’s stirring fake sugar from the packets into his iced tea, still skimming news stories. Sam raises his eyebrows. "How long do you think that’ll take?" he says.

Dean shrugs. "Depends on what the questions are—could be nothing, but it might be a day or two’s work."

Sam bites his lips between his teeth. This is exactly what he thought would happen. He looks out the window for a long moment of breathing, trying to be calm. Watches the lazy small-town afternoon on the street outside, sturdy Midwestern people going about their day despite the cold weather. Short squat buildings and bare trees, little fading stores just waiting to be replaced by shinier chains. He doesn’t know the name of this town. It’s a lot busier than Lebanon has ever been, but Sam recognizes the look—and the look on Dean’s face, too. Abstracted, thinking about the bunker. Home. About the work, always, nearly the same look their dad would have those times he’d randomly come back to provide a little haphazard instruction, to ask how their studies were and if they were behaving, being safe, before he’d strike out into the world again. Sam looks back across the table at Dean, watches him scratch at his freshly-shaved jaw as he reads some story, and thinks: no.

It takes another few minutes of digging through websites, threading his way around the country by newspapers and obituary sections, before he finds it, and it’s perfect. "Huh," he says, just for effect. "I think this is a case."

In his periphery, Dean looks up from the newspaper. "A case?"

He highlights the section of obituary, under the girl’s smiling high school photo. "Sophie Carlton," he says, and turns the laptop around so Dean can see. "Read it, it doesn’t sound like natural causes to me."

Dean’s frowning at him, though, and doesn’t even glance at the monitor. "You want to go on a hunt," he says. "Now. We’re looking for Dad, Sam."

Sam huffs. "You think I forgot?"

The waitress arrives with their plates before Dean can say anything. "Patty melts!" she says, brightly. She levels another charming smile at Dean, but he’s ducked his head and is just staring at the plate, and the smile fades a little as she looks to Sam. "Anything else I can get you gentlemen?"

"No, thanks," Sam says, letting his tone go dismissive. She disappears, and he watches Dean across the table for a few seconds. The only other diners are an old guy drinking coffee at the counter, and a mom with her toddler on the other side of the restaurant, so there’s no one around to hear. "This girl, she went swimming in the local lake, and she disappeared without a trace. No body, nothing. They’re saying she drowned, but I’m betting it was something else."

"Okay," Dean says, dragging it out, and finally looks up from his plate to frown at Sam. "That’s sad. We’re a little busy with other things right now, though."
"We’re going to keep looking for Dad," Sam says, a little louder than he meant to from how Dean leans back. He takes a deep breath. "We are. You think there’s anything in the world I want more than finding the thing that killed Jenn?" Dean shakes his head, eyes dropping down to his plate again. "It’s going to be a fight, though, man. A long, long fight. We’re going to run into stuff, while we’re looking, and we’ve got to be ready."

"Stuff," Dean says. He picks up the cheap, lightweight fork and starts poking around the iceberg and carrot shreds of his salad, stirring in the dressing. "Monsters, you mean."

"And ghosts, and witches, and everything else we ever read about." Sam knocks the still-open laptop, jolts it awake so the obituary’s visible again. "Things like this? Cases we run into, while we’re looking? We should be saving people, anyway, but getting some practice in can’t hurt. Hell, we have to."

Dean looks at him, eyes a little narrow. "I did fine with that hunt back in Portsmouth," he says.

Sam sits back on his side of the booth and smacks a hand onto the laptop bag, where their dad’s journal is tucked close and safe. "You’ve been reading Dad’s stuff, same as me," he says. "I know you noticed. He was going on hunts, just like I said, the whole time. He didn’t just catch one little ghost and call it good."

He gets an eyeroll for that. The door behind Dean jingles open and an older guy comes in, sits at the counter close enough to their booth that he could hear their conversation. Sam leans in closer, lowers his voice. "We are going back to the bunker," he says. "But look. This is a case, a real case. People dying, three this year alone. We go, we stop it, we save people, and we finally get some real-world experience after all those years of studying."

Dean raises his eyebrows, but finally shakes his head a little and picks up his patty melt. "Fine," he says, squinting at the sandwich. "But if we don’t head back to Lebanon after this, I’m knocking you out and taking my car back and going there myself."

Sam raises his eyebrows. "How’ll you do that, shorty," he says, and pushes the laptop out of the way so he can finally eat his own lunch.

"I know fifteen different spells that’d do it, don’t push me," Dean says, and then mutters, "real-world experience, please," before he takes a bite.

Sam takes a bite, too, and it’s good, grilled onions and great buttery rye. Not as good as that place on Hampshire in Boston they go to—used to go to—but Dean groans a little and closes his eyes, chewing happily. Sam grins, holding his fist in front of his mouth so he doesn’t gross out the waitress coming back to check on them. If a half-decent patty melt in Who-Cares, Indiana, is exciting for Dean, Sam can’t imagine what the rest of the country might do.

It’s a late and chilly morning the next day as they close in on Lake Manitoc, just an hour northwest of Madison. They stopped in Bloomington the night before to take advantage of the university library—and it was entertaining to watch Dean’s eyes go wide at that sheer volume of books, no matter that ninety percent of them wouldn’t hold a drop of information that they could use—and Sam’s been going through the print-outs they made the whole drive up.  

"I don’t get it," Sam says. He wishes they’d gotten another cup of coffee when they fueled up in Waunakee. "The pattern just doesn’t make any sense. Three deaths this year—the Carlton girl, the Barr guy, this ice-fishing competition death—but then the other six deaths spread out over three
"Four decades, technically," Dean says. He’s more-or-less comfortable on the highway, now, but he’s still got his hands at ten-and-two, checking the rearview more than he needs to. "Thirty-five years since the first death. Whatever’s taking the victims is speeding up its timeline."

Sam flips through the black-and-white pictures on their copies from the microfiche, the blurry faces of people long-gone. "Could be some kind of water monster, I guess," he says, but it doesn’t feel right.

"What?" Dean says, glancing over the seat before he makes the turn towards the town. "The Dobhar-chú? Monstro?"

Sam smacks him in the arm with the print-outs and Dean smiles, just a little, and points the Impala down the narrow road into Manitoc. It’s quiet out here, the trees closing in tight all around. They pass an older truck and the guy waves at them, not fake-friendly but just companionable, acknowledgment of the unlikelihood of seeing someone else on the road. Sam waves back. Dean doesn’t, of course. One day, Sam thinks.

Manitoc’s a tourist town, most of the year, but in the last dregs of November there isn’t much going on. They coast along, sedately following the speed limit through the minimal traffic, and Sam tries to get the lay of the land, as much as he can. Motel, bed and breakfast, a few chintzy woodcarving and hunting trophy shops still open. A cafe advertising fried fish sandwiches, a plump lady putting up cling-film turkey decals in the window, and Sam stares at that until they pull away from the stop sign and he realizes, oh. It’s almost Thanksgiving.

"Should we ask for directions?" Dean says.

Sam startles to attention, but shakes his head. "No, these little towns are all set up the same way—the station will be right here in the middle of everything, right up against the little town hall and the square." He sits up, tucks his hair behind his ears and keeps an eye out while Dean trundles slowly along. "You sure about this student thing? FBI worked fine back in Portsmouth."

"How did you ever do this alone," Dean says, not quite under his breath. Sam gives him a look, and he sighs, making another turn down a little street. "FBI requires a federal jurisdiction. What could some drowning deaths in a lake possibly have to do with major crimes or terrorism or interstate organizations? Anyway, we’re going to be talking to a sheriff, and if we claim some kind of jurisdiction he’s going to want to check up on it."

"Okay, okay, you win," Sam says, rolling his eyes, and then there’s the station, finally. Once they’re parked he gets out and stretches, ignoring the cold air for a second just to work out that cramped feeling of sitting forever in a car. He’d forgotten how bad it could get to him, when he was on his road trip. The sun’s barely peeking through the grey layer of clouds, but at least there’s no wind. He shrugs his shoulders, stretching his neck a little, and looks around: bare trees, spindly grey naked bushes, just two sheriff’s squad cars parked in the lot. Not quite a one-horse town, but close.

Dean’s standing on the other side of the car looking at his new cell phone, squinting down at the little screen, and Sam grins. "You’ll get used to it eventually," he says, and Dean sends him another look over the hood. Sam looks at him more closely, then, and sighs. "Okay, hold on. If we’re going with the PhD premise, you can’t wear a tie."

Dean looks down at himself. "Why not? The adepts at the bunker all had degrees, and they wore ties."
"Trust me," Sam says, and glances at the blank face of the sheriff’s station before he comes around the car to block Dean from view. "I met plenty of students, graduate and otherwise, over the last couple of years—they’re lucky if they shave and shower, much less get into professional wear. Loosen it up a little."

He tugs Dean’s tie loose, and Dean bats gently at his hand to get him off. "They’re going to be academics, they should have standards," he complains, but he does tug off his tie, unraveling it and looping it swiftly around his hand.

Sam stands back a little, squinting at him, and really there’s no help for the polished Oxfords and the suit, though at least it’s kind of old-fashioned. Makes Dean look like maybe he’s a student who borrowed his dad’s suit. Not untrue, really. In comparison Sam looks like the broke younger co-author, jeans and sneakers and a secondhand coat, and—well, also not untrue. Another old truck drives by, with another wave from the guy behind the wheel, and Sam smile and waves back and takes a deep breath when Dean frowns and looks at where he’s waving. "Okay," he says. "Ready?"

The office is dim, brown, wood-paneled everything. The bell jingles behind them, like a diner, and Sam scans the place while the woman behind the desk looks up from her computer and says, "What can I do you for?"

"Hi," Sam says, smiling politely. Dean stands just behind him, being no help, but of course Sam didn’t expect anything. "We’re graduate students from Madison working on a paper about watershed management, and we’ve heard that there have been some deaths on the lake—we were hoping to talk to someone about that.

The woman blinks at them. "Watershed management?" she says, the Wisconsin thick in her voice. She exchanges a glance with the officer behind the desk with her, a balding guy who doesn’t look like he’s been running many wind-sprints. "What does the sheriff’s office have to do with all that?"

The officer stands up and rests his hands on his gun belt, bottom lip pushed out as he shakes his head. "Boys, I don’t think you got the right story here," he says, a little condescending. "Those poor folks who died up at the lake, that was drownings. Not animal attacks."

Sam tilts his head. "Oh!" he says, loading on the confusion. Dean shifts, in his periphery. "I thought—didn’t we read that there weren’t any bodies recovered?"

When he turns, Dean looks at him wide-eyed and then at the other two. "That’s what I thought," he manages, after a second. "The lake was dragged, and no bodies."

Awkward, but then half of the grad students Sam has met have been barely capable of human speech, so at least it’s in character. The officer frowns, again, and Sam butts in before he can say anything: "Is there any way we can talk to the sheriff, sir? We just want to get accurate information for our paper."

The glass door to the internal office says Sheriff Jacob Devins in bronze stuck-on letters. There wasn’t much information about him when they searched back in Bloomington—just a few news stories, where he talked about people who’d drowned. When he’d won his election, a dozen years
ago. The officer glances at the secretary, who shrugs, and then says, "Well, I don’t know if it’s something to bother Jake with," but he raps on the door anyway, and goes in, and shuts it behind him.

There are two little plastic chairs in the tiny lobby and Sam and Dean take them, Dean sitting rigid until Sam elbows him, lightly. The woman stares at them for a minute until she shakes her head and starts typing. Sam doesn’t know what she might be working on—other than the drownings, it didn’t seem like this county had much in the way of crime or even anything interesting happening for the last six months. Above their heads, the wooden clock starts to chime. Noon. Sam rubs his palms on his thighs, looking around at the old hunting and fishing magazines, the stuffed fish on the wall. If they don’t get anything from this, they’ll have to figure out where else to look—the sheriff’s office would have the most updated version of the deaths, with all the evidence these people would collect, but they can pry details out of the rest of the town. It’ll just take some time, maybe more time than Dean will afford, when Sam needs to make sure he doesn’t go back to ground in the bunker.

Dean’s shifting in his seat and Sam’s drumming his fingers on the side of his thigh when the door to the station swings open again and a slender woman enters, followed by a little boy. "Come on, sweetie," she’s saying, gently, her hand on his back, under the secretary’s greeting.

"Andrea, honey!" she says, and Andrea glances over at them but then smiles, turning to the woman.

"Hi, Deb," she says. Her voice is a little tired, her shoulders slumped under her warm coat. "Is my dad with anyone?"

"Just Roger," the secretary—Deb, apparently—says, with a warm smile at Andrea. "Hang on, I’ll grab him for you."

Andrea nods, and crouches by her kid, and Sam watches them both. Deb opens the door into the sheriff’s inner sanctum without knocking, leaning in to talk, and Andrea smooths her hands over the little boy’s head, tucking his long hair behind his ears. He’s maybe seven or eight, looking at the floor. "You’re going to stay with Grandpa and Deb and Roger for a while, okay, sweetie?" she says.

Sam licks his lips and stands. "Hi," he says, with a smile, and Andrea looks up at him. "Are you from around here?"

"Born and raised," she says, smiling back, and stands up. Her hand stays protectively on the boy’s shoulder. "You boys in trouble?"

She’s maybe two or three years older than Dean, young and pretty. Sam bites his lip and shakes his head. "No, ma’am," he says, with a touch of emphasis, and she raises her eyebrows at him for it. Before he can say anything more, though, Deb comes back to the front desk, followed by Roger and then by another man who must be Sheriff Devins: late forties, a touch of grey at the temples but still fit.

"Honey," Devins says, coming around the counter. Andrea accepts the kiss on her cheek with a smile.

"Sir?" Sam says, interrupting, and Devins and Andrea and Deb and Roger all look at him, startled. Dean’s still watching the floor; so is the kid. He puts on another smile. The sheriff’s out of his office and they’re probably not going to get another opportunity. "Sir, I was hoping—we were hoping you might be able to share some information, for our project."

Devins gives him a tight-lipped smile back, but shakes his head. "That’s what I heard, son," he says. "I’m afraid there’s not much more I can tell you beyond what you’ll get in the paper." Sam opens his
mouth and Devins cuts him off. "Good luck with your research, boys."

Sam closes his mouth. Devins turns away, dismissal done, and Andrea gives them a brief look before she turns back. "I'll be back around three?" she says, and Devins drops another kiss on her head before he goes back into his office and closes the door.

Sam props his hands on his hips and looks at the closed door for a second. Andrea’s talking to Deb, something about heating up lunch, and Sam looks down at Dean. "Now what?" he says, quietly.

Dean shrugs, looking uncomfortable, and Sam sighs. Not a lot of help, but maybe that’s not such a surprise.

"What are you guys doing here?" Andrea says. She’s come over to their dusty end of the little lobby, arms folded loosely over her stomach. "You have a research project?"

She looks genuinely curious, looking back and forth between the two of them. "Yeah," Sam says, shrugging. "We were hoping to get some information from the sheriff—I guess he must be your dad?"

She smiles. "I’m afraid you won’t be able to get to him through me, if that’s what you’re hoping," she says, and Sam ducks his head a little. Caught. "He’s pretty hard to budge once he’s made up his mind."

"Well, it was good to meet you, anyway—Andrea?" Sam holds out his hand.

"Andrea Barr," she says, shaking it, her hand tiny in his grip but firm enough, a solid policeman’s daughter handshake.

He blinks for a second, her name catching his attention, but then Dean shifts in his seat next to where they’re standing and he says, "Hi," quietly, and Sam looks over to find Dean sitting forward a little, eyes on the boy. "What’s your name, bud?"

The boy’s just staring at the ground—has been, the whole time. Andrea takes her hand back and turns, and with three sets of eyes on him the boy ducks behind the counter, to an empty seat at the far end from where Deb and Roger are working, and Andrea sighs. "Nice to meet you," she says, and follows her son to where he’s now staring at the bare desk. She says, "Here you go, Lucas, honey," just barely loud enough to hear, producing crayons from her bag, and Lucas immediately takes them and starts scrawling out a drawing on a blank notepad. Andrea pets his hair back from his face, kissing the top of his head again with zero acknowledgment, and Sam looks down at Dean and jerks his head, not wanting to interfere any more.

Past noon and the day’s not much warmer, though the sun’s doing its best to burn away the cloud cover. Sam shoves his hands into his pockets, glad of his coat as they head back to the car. "So, that was a dead end," he says. Dean’s spinning the car keys between his hands, watching his feet as he follows Sam, and he doesn’t respond. Sam frowns. "What?"

Dean glances up, finally, and then shakes his head. "Just—thinking." He runs his fingers through his hair, mussing its neat part. "Okay. What now?"

"Motel," Sam says, as they get into the car, "and then see if we can dig up someone else to talk to. Maybe we should’ve tried a different tack with the sheriff."

They pull out onto the road, and Sam checks the oncoming traffic out of habit in time to see Dean roll his eyes. "What, Homeland Security? We don’t have anyone fielding calls to back us up." They hit the stoplight where the town’s two biggest roads converge and Dean hits his blinker, drumming
his fingers on the wheel while he waits for the few cars to pass by. "I’m wondering about the Barrs."

Sam frowns. "Andrea?"

"And Lucas." The motel they passed on the way in is just another block south and Dean pulls into the parking lot while Sam’s still thinking about the two of them. Skinny Andrea, tired but kind, and her uncommunicative, silent kid.

Dean turns the engine off and reaches past Sam into the glovebox for his envelope of cash, pulling out a few bills and handing them over. Sam sighs. "I guess I’m getting the room," he says, and unfolds himself from the car and goes to talk to the bored guy in the office, who’s flat-out shocked to be getting business this late in the season. "Just passing through," Sam says, smiling flatly, and gets their keys. Eventually he’s going to make Dean do this part.

The room’s big, in the way small-town motel rooms so often are, and Sam takes the bed closer to the door. "Barr," Dean says, again. Sam turns around to find Dean stalled at the little table, bags dropped on either side of him as he rifles through their pile of print-outs. He finds one and spins it around on the wooden tabletop so Sam can look. "Christopher Barr. He was the last drowning death, before Sophie Carlton."

The article they found was just a simple one, a short statement from Sheriff Devins and not much else. Sam skims it again in the dim light coming through the blinds, reads: survived by his wife and son, and says, "Oh, god," the weight of dread dropping into the pit of his stomach.

The motel has wifi, sluggish though it is, and it only takes a few minutes to find a better article in the area’s local paper from May. Local Man in Tragic Accident. Sam sighs, pushing his laptop back, and Dean comes around the table and leans over his shoulder to read. Christopher Barr, dead at thirty-two, drowned in the lake where he grew up swimming. Six months gone. The picture with the article is awful, the little boy wet-rat soaked and pale, staring ghoul-eyed out of the page with Roger’s arm around his blanketed shoulders. The local hack writer doesn’t spare details, clearly trying to drag out as much salacious information as possible, laying it on thick about the young wife left behind and the child robbed of a father.

"Two hours," Dean says, quiet beside his ear. "God."

Sam can’t imagine. A little kid floating out there, alone, frightened, waiting for rescue. Did Andrea get worried and call someone, he wonders. Was it just some random passerby, seeing a boy alone on a little raft, saving him from the same fate as his dad.

"If it’s a creature, something that lives in the lake," Dean says, standing up and walking to the window, "why would it take Christopher, but not Lucas?"

Sam minimizes the article, so that little face isn’t staring out at him. Dean’s looking out over the quiet town, the trees that separate them from a view of the water. "Maybe it only takes adults, for some reason?" Sam says, but even as it’s coming out of his mouth it doesn’t sound true. "And why these victims? There’s got to be a ton of people in and out of that lake, especially in the busy season. Sophie was probably the only one swimming in November, but all summer it only picked Christopher? Why?"

Dean shakes his head. He turns around, arms folded tight over his chest. "We should check out the lake," he says. "See if we can get any clue about what it might be. If it’s a real monster, it has to leave sign of some kind—bones, or tracks, something that might be mistaken for a normal animal."

Sam nods and closes the laptop. "I’ll ask the manager for a hiking map of the area, that might give us
an idea of where to start," he says, and pulls his coat back on. Dean picks up his handed-down case of supplies, cracking open the lid to rummage through reagents. He’s still in his peacoat, his blue suit and Oxfords, and Sam shakes his head on the way out the door. "We’ve got to get you some boots," he says, and closes the door on Dean’s eyeroll, and heads down the little sidewalk across the parking lot back to the office. He’s betting it only takes a mile of walking through muddy woods for Dean to admit Sam’s right.

Despite looking at the area on the map before they came out, despite the trail guide the guy at the Lakefront Motel gave them, Sam’s still kind of shocked by the size of the lake. It stretches out into the distance, a sullen grey under the dim sky, surrounded on all sides by tall, silent woods. Dean gives Sam a long-bladed silver knife with the shrugged explanation of, "Silver usually works," and Sam takes it carefully by the mother-of-pearl handle, shaking his head. Dean has his own, a little less ostentatious, and together they make their way carefully through the forest, ten feet between them but always in sight of each other. On the way over to the trailhead, Dean had run through some of the kinds of monster-tracks they might be looking for, not that Sam needed the reminder. Studying creatures, how they operated and how to take them out, was one of the kinds of homework he’d never needed to be reminded to do—even as a kid, he’d wondered about hunting, about getting out and saving the day, for real. He’d even imagined something like this: the quiet under still, dark trees, moving slow and cautious, a blade in hand as he hunted evil. Like something out of a story.

Of course, not finding anything after two hours of trudging through mud, leaves in his hair and water from nowhere trickling unexpectedly under his collar, that wasn’t exactly storybook. Still, at least there’s some upside.

"You didn’t tell me hunting was this boring," Dean says off to his right, sour.

Sam grins. "How are your feet?" he says, and looks over in time to catch a death-glare.

"Absolutely fine," Dean says, and to prove it he stalks off, ducking under a tree-branch and stepping over a fallen log, his polished shoes hopelessly scuffed up and dirty, mud on the hems of his trousers, a slight limp in his step from miles and miles of walking. Sam wrinkles his nose, feels only a little bad. He did tell him, after all.

They’ve covered the ground alongside the lake loop trail, and come back the long way along the shoreline, past the dozens of private residences that dot the lake’s circumference. Most of them are empty, from what Sam can tell—probably summer cabins, unused this far out of season, and so no one has called them out for trespassing as they examine the rocky shore and the thick verge where the trees crowd in close against people’s fences, looking for any kind of sign. They haven’t found a thing over five miles of woods and shore; Sam’s starting to wonder if they will. Maybe the creature, if there is one at all, lives exclusively in the water—somewhere deep, far enough down that the sun doesn’t penetrate the cold and dark. He can imagine it: some kind of lair, full of gnawed-clean bones and old forgotten things. If that’s the case, he doesn’t know what he and Dean will do. He can’t imagine Dean leaping at the chance to scuba dive down there; he can imagine Dean’s face at the suggestion that Sam go alone.

Dean’s sitting on a largish rock set up where the trail reappears when Sam comes around from behind a few thick trees, looking at the trail map to cover the attempt to rest his feet. Sam licks his lips, hiding a smile, but comes over and sits on the edge of the rock, anyway. Five miles is kind of a lot. "Scoot," he says, and Dean sighs but gives up a few more inches, their shoulders crushed in close together, the silver knives laid safely in the grass at their feet. Sam traces the trail they’ve made and then looks up, through the thinner foliage to the dark water. The woods on the far shore are
blurry with distance, a solid wall of dark impenetrable green, and there are more trails over there, more places to hide, more miles to cover. "We could look for weeks," he says.

They’re sitting close enough that he feels the deep breath Dean takes. "We’re missing something," Dean says. "The temperature up here is all wrong for a nereid. Naiads drag their victims into the water from the shore, so we’d see the marks. Grindylows have that distinct four-clawed mark, and we’d see that on the shoreline, too."

"Well, maybe it’s not a creature, then," Sam says, getting up again to pace along the trail. "A water wraith could lure someone in to drown."

Dean tilts his head, letting the map drop down crumpled against his calf. "Maybe," he says, but he sounds skeptical. "You don’t think someone might have said something, though, if a ghostly woman was haunting these waters? That’s the kind of thing that fills up cheesy tourist websites."

Sam puts his hands on his hips. "Since when are you going to cheesy tourist websites?"

Dean opens his mouth, and closes it, and then busies himself with neatly folding the map into neat, re-creased lines. Before Sam can say anything else, there’s a crunch of gravel further along the trail, and they both turn their heads to see a guy come around the bend in the woods and stop short, staring at the sight of them.

"Hi," Sam says, smiling automatically.

The guy’s Sam’s age, maybe, dark-haired and thick-necked but a little chubby, like a former football player running to fat. He’s wearing a too-big plaid coat and looks completely at home in the woods, and not exactly happy to see them. "What are you guys doing here?" he says.

Not completely rude, but close. Sam takes a few steps closer, tucking his hands into his pockets and hunching in his shoulders with his long experience of easing his own intimidation factor. Jocks aren’t good tippers at the best of times. "We’re grad students from Madison, working on a research project about the watershed," he says, the lie a little smoother now that he’s had some practice. "I’m Sam, this is Dean. Are you from around here?"

"Born and raised," he says, echoing Andrea exactly. "Will Carlton."

Sam blinks. "You’re—" he starts, before he can catch himself.

"Sophie Carlton," Dean says, quietly, and stands up.

Will’s eyes drop. Not rude, then. Grieving. "She’s my—she was—" he says, and stumbles to a halt, and shakes his head.

"I’m sorry," Sam says, and means it.

It’s quiet out here, birds long flown south for the winter and no one else on the trails, so it’s easy to hear the ragged breath Will pulls in. From his age, Sophie must have been his sister. Sam glances over at Dean, watches him watch Will with a tight, unhappy expression. He can’t imagine.

"So, uh," Will says, shaking his head. "The watershed? What are you doing here?"

Sam gestures at the water, through the trees. "We read about what’s been happening on the lake in the last few months," he says, with an apologetic grimace. "We wondered if there might be something affecting the local wildlife, if there had been more attacks."
"Attacks?"

"Our professor," Dean puts in, quietly. "He suggested that it might have been animal attacks."

He’s got his coat pulled closed against the chilly breeze off the lake, at least hiding his suit jacket, but he still looks completely out of place here in the woods. Luckily, Will doesn’t really seem to notice, just looking at Dean and then turning his frown out on the trees. Sam takes a breath, and then gambles. "But, you know, we didn’t have all the facts, then. With how cold it’s been lately, I guess it must just have been hypothermia or something."

Will shakes his head, immediately. "No," he says, fast, like it’s not the first time. "No, no way." He goes to the far edge of the trail and pushes one of the lower branches aside, ducking under to get closer to the shore. Sam glances at Dean and follows, matching Will’s pace as he steps through the dark undergrowth down to where the soil gives way to the water-smoothed pebbles of the shore. He gets close to the edge of the water, but doesn’t touch it, and points. "See that?"

Maybe another mile along the shoreline—a dock, off in the distance, and behind it a red-roofed house. Footsteps crunch up alongside Sam and he and Dean look at each other, then back to Will. "That’s our house," Will says. "We grew up there, and Sophie practically lived in the water, her whole life. Swam varsity for the school and won a bunch of meets, because she trained all the time."

"Even in November?" Sam says.

Will shrugs, folding his arms over his chest. "She was a freak for it," he says, and it’s so fond and sad that Sam’s throat closes, for a second. "Said she wanted to get in all the swimming she could before the lake disappears."

"What?" Dean says. Will looks up at him, surprised. "Disappears?"

"Oh," Will says, frowning. "Yeah, because of the dam… thing. It’s breaking down, and my dad said they were opening up the spillway, so." He shrugs. "No more lake."

"When did this start?" Sam says, mentally ticking back through the articles they read. "For our research."

Will shrugs again. "I don’t know, maybe back in February?" he says, and then shakes his head. "I don’t know, maybe it’s—animals, or something, like you said. They never found any—but she just went down." He clears his throat, and stops. He looks over at the dock and sighs, eyes closing for a moment, before his shoulders square. "Look, I better get back to my dad. Good luck with your paper, or whatever."

"Thanks, Will," Sam says, and Will just nods and trudges back across the rocks, disappearing again into the trees.

Sam blows out a long sigh and drags a hand through his hair. The people left behind, they’re the other thing he didn’t miss about hunting. All that pain, and nothing to be done but to stop it happening to someone else, and what good did that do the families already suffering a gaping wound?

"Okay?" Dean says. When Sam looks up Dean’s watching him, concern all over his face.

"I’m fine," Sam says, and even if he doesn’t mean it—well, what are they going to do about it on the side of a lake.

Dean holds his eyes for a moment, then jerks his head back at the trail. "Come on," he says. "Let’s
rescue my silver blades before some raccoon carries them off to its nest, and then let’s dig up some
details about the dam. Maybe there’s a connection there, somehow.”

Sam nods, and heads back up to the trail, letting the quiet of the woods close around them again once
the trees are blocking them from the shore. "Raccoons?" he says, after a few seconds.

"Dude, I don’t know," Dean says, shoving another tree branch out of his way. He’s sounding
irritable again, and Sam smiles, despite everything. "Eagles? Badgers? Whatever’s dumb enough to
live in the woods."

"I should take you camping, sometime," Sam says, scooping up the long knives from where they’d
been half-hidden in the dying grass. A little damp, but undamaged, and he hands Dean’s over.

"I’ll hex you if you try," Dean says, flatly, and turns up the trail to make it back to where they left the
car. With the way the trail loops, it’s only about another mile away, but Dean sighs anyway. "I need
the biggest cup of coffee in Wisconsin."

For the briefest moment, Sam’s hit with a craving for his own coffee—the espresso he’d grind out of
the shop’s cheapest beans, a splash of steamed milk and a little too much sugar. Sitting down after his
shift at the table in the corner too close to the bathroom so no one wanted it, waiting for Jenn to finish
her morning class so she could come and have a cup of coffee with him. He closes his eyes and
wants it so badly that it hurts.

"I’m sure they have coffee at that cafe we passed," Sam says, after a pause that went on too long. "If
they don’t, you can hex them, too."

"Oh, no," Dean says, "you’re still the one getting hexed, trust me," but he walks a little faster at the
promise of coffee, anyway. Sam takes a deep breath, and follows.

At the car, Dean demands that they take off their shoes and scrape off as much mud as possible, and
with the mild bickering over that and the delay it’s almost half past three by the time they make it
back down from the trailhead to the motel. A quick change out of muddy jeans for Sam, and into his
second still-clean suit for Dean, and they’re walking again, in search of lunch and a spot to do some
research. Dean’s limping again, just a little, and Sam can’t decide what would be more satisfying: the
gigantic told-you-so he deserves, or nobly not saying anything in such a way that Dean knows
exactly what he’s thinking. They come around the corner onto the main drag and Dean winces,
obviously agitating a blister, and Sam shakes his head and decides not to say anything, after all.
Dean’s gotten the point, by now.

The cafe they passed that morning is just another block down, but Dean stops in his tracks when
they’re halfway there. "Dude," Sam says, "coffee," but then follows Dean’s eyeline and—oh.

There’s a little park on the other side of the street. Swings, slides, jungle gym. There are a few kids
playing on the swings, half-shouting to each other and laughing. At a little bench, far away from the
other children, sits Lucas, with Andrea standing and watching a little distance away, her arms folded
protectively over her chest.

"Poor woman," Sam says, quietly.

"Poor kid," Dean says, eyes fixed on Lucas. He seems to be coloring, again, working intently and
not paying any attention to the world around him. Dean rubs his fingers over his mouth. "Two
hours," he says, and glances at Sam. "He’s the only living witness we’ve heard about."
Sam frowns. "Yeah, but—" He shakes his head. "It won’t do any good if he doesn’t talk."

Dean licks his lips, and suddenly steps out into the street, buttoning his coat against the cold. A mumbled curse and Sam follows, glad that this town is so sleepy. He’s got to get Dean into the habit of actually looking when he crosses the road.

Andrea glances up when they approach and gives them a small smile. She’s pretty, Sam thinks, despite how thin she is and the dark, sleepless shadows below her eyes. It’s sadder, now he can guess why they’re there. "Hi again," she says, when they’re close enough. "Any luck with the watershed?" Sam raises his eyebrows and she shrugs, smile deepening. "Deb told me. I don’t think she quite got it."

Sam smiles back. "We’re pretty used to that," he says, truthfully enough, and Andrea laughs. Small, but it’s a laugh.

The other kids on the playground shriek with laughter over something and Andrea glances over—some other little boy fallen off the swings, a girl clapping, the other parents on the far side of the park unconcerned. Just a few families around, but it’s an idyllic small-town scene. Mothers and fathers, their kids. Andrea’s separate from them, just as Lucas is. He’s trying to come up with some kind of small talk, something to lead in to the questions they need to ask when, quietly, Dean says, "May I go and say hi to Lucas?" and it’s so unexpected that Sam doesn’t quite get it, at first.

He schools his expression in time, when Andrea turns back with a frown. "Lucas?" she says, and it’s just confused. "Why?"

Dean takes a deep breath, but he holds her eyes, without a glance at Sam. "He just looks like he could use some company," Dean says.

Her lips part and she glances at her son, and back, studying Dean’s face for a moment before she nods. Dean doesn’t smile, just walks slowly along the sparse and dying grass to the bench where Lucas sits with his drawing. Sam and Andrea watch while he says something, the boy not reacting at all, and then Dean sits down on the bench next to where Lucas works, looking off into the distance. He doesn’t look as out of place as Sam thought he would.

"That’s a kind gesture from your friend," Andrea says, soft. "Most people don’t want to deal with him."

Sam tucks his hands into his pockets, watches Dean say something unheard. "Do you mind if I ask?" he says. "Has he always…"

Andrea’s shaking her head before he finishes. "He used to be a complete chatterbox." She looks at the ground and smiles, tight-lipped. "Ran me off my feet, some days, the little troublemaker."

There’s a fondness in her voice, faint and frail. She looks up, and her eyes are dry when she meets Sam’s. "There was an accident, a few months ago," she says, clear and direct. Sam doesn’t know how she does it. "My husband passed and Lucas—well. He hasn’t spoken. Not since then."

An accident. Like it wasn’t a big deal, like it was sad but just the sort of thing that happens. Just a fire, he thinks. Tragic. "I’m sorry," Sam says. He means it. Dean’s still talking to Lucas, it seems, and Sam can’t imagine what he’s saying. He doesn’t know what to say here, either. So many platitudes thrown at him, so recently, and he can’t seem to remember one that he can work past the sudden lump in his throat. Andrea nods, watching Dean and Lucas with steady eyes, slim and upright with her arms folded over her stomach, and Sam says, finally, "How are you?"
She smiles, and looks up at him. He can almost see the I’m fine forming on her lips before she pauses. "I’m getting by," she says, after a moment. She nods at Lucas. "Anyway, I’ve got to be here for him. He’s what matters."

Sam bites the inside of his cheek. Six months. He wonders what she was like, before. He closes his eyes for a few seconds and the fire roars back, that vision of the blood spilling forth and the pale limbs twisted on the ceiling. Dreams coming to life and turning into a worse nightmare. He drags a hand over his face and then folds the strap of the laptop bag into a tight grip, his knuckles hard and grounding against his chest. There’s something to be said for having a focus, a purpose, to drag the eyes open every morning and force the body upright. "I hope it gets better," he says.

At the bench, Dean stands up and says one last thing to Lucas, head bent, before starts back across to them, his hands deep in his pockets. Andrea blinks at Sam. "People usually tell me it will," she says. He shrugs. "Thanks," she says, and then when Dean comes close she turns to him and says, warm, "Thanks to you, too."

He glances at Sam, frowning, and licks his lips. "I don’t know what good it did," he says. He makes eye contact with her, briefly, then looks right back at the ground.

"It’s good to have someone talking to him besides me and my dad and the therapist," she says, watching as Lucas scribbles fiercely with his crayons. She sighs, tucking her hair behind her ears, and turns to face them both. "We moved into my dad’s house, a few months ago. Maybe you guys can come to dinner tomorrow, if you’re still in town."

Sam raises his eyebrows, exchanging a glance with Dean. "Really? The sheriff didn’t exactly seem thrilled to help us out."

She shrugs. "I was going to go to school for environmental studies, before we had Lucas," she says, and smiles. "I don’t mind trying to help out the science geeks."

Sam huffs a laugh. Dean sends him a sidelong look, but manages, "Thank you," polite as can be, and Sam can tell he can think of about fifty things he’d rather do than struggle through family dinner with the sheriff and his kind daughter. He’ll have to suck it up, if that’s the only way they can get the information they need.

Andrea’s focus snaps away, then, and Sam follows to see Lucas approaching. "Hi, sweetie," she says, soft. "Are you ready to go?"

Lucas doesn’t look at her, eyes on the ground looking off to something they can’t see. He has a big piece of paper in his hands and Sam expects him to give it to Andrea, but instead he holds it up for Dean to take, long hair flopping into his face. Dean catches Sam’s eyes, startled, but takes the paper. When he unfolds it, it’s a drawing: a house, red roof and brown wood, done in childish bold strokes and bright colors.

"Thank you," Dean says, slowly. "Thanks, Lucas."

Andrea stares, mouth open, and Lucas just—walks off, back to his bench. Her hand’s still outstretched toward his shoulder, and she closes it, lets it hang in the air for a moment. "What did you say?" she says, at last, not looking at Dean.

He shakes his head. "I just talked to him," he says, holding the picture out in front of him. It’s incongruous in his hands, and for the boy who drew it, and for the grey cold day they’re standing in. "I told him I liked his art."
He’s lying. Sam knows it, immediately. Andrea might or might not, but she only frowns and watches Lucas settle down next to the bench again, dragging his crayons closer and going to town on some new paper.

"Do you—want it?" Dean says, holding the picture out for Andrea.

She startles, and looks at him, and studies his face. Sam bites the inside of his cheek again. "He gave it to you," she says, shrugging. Her smile this time takes obvious effort. "It’d be rude to re-gift it."

Sam says their goodbyes, and Andrea nods, distracted. He jerks his head at Dean and they cross out of the park again. Almost four o’clock and some of the parents on the playground are gathering their kids, starting to go home with the day dimming, a chilly wind starting up. Soon, it’ll just be the Barrs left. They hit the sidewalk and, when Sam’s sure they’re out of hearing distance, he nudes Dean with an elbow. "Seriously," he says. "What was that?"

Dean’s rolling the drawing into a scroll as they walk, fidgeting with the paper, and he keeps his eyes on it. "Really, I talked to him about the art," Dean says. "I wanted to see if he could communicate through drawing, if that could be a way to get him to talk about the accident without actually having to talk about it."

Sam chews the inside of his lip, thinking. "That’s a therapy trick, right, with little kids? Get them to draw what they’re worried about?" Dean shrugs, eyes still pinned to the sidewalk and his face cast to grim, and Sam frowns. "Maybe his therapist tried it, too. We might be able to get into the office, wherever it is, read the notes."

He reaches the door of the cafe first and holds it open, the bell jingling. Dean’s just standing in the middle of the sidewalk, staring at him. "You want to read Lucas’s therapy notes?" he says.

Inside, the guy behind the counter smiles at them, and Sam jerks his head to get Dean moving. They’re weird enough for this town, no need to call more attention to it. "Only if it’ll get us the answers we need," he says, much more quietly as Dean passes him, and gets just a head-shake for his trouble. He sighs, and follows as they’re pointed to a booth by the huge glass window, with a view of the almost-empty streets. The Letters have never been shy about espionage, trickery, and outright theft, when it suits their purposes; if Dean’s not aware that hunting will involve the same casual acquaintance with the law, he’s got another thing coming.

Ralph who runs the cafe is friendly without being annoying and points out the wifi password as soon as he sees the laptop, so he’s good in Sam’s book. They’re quickly supplied with coffee mugs and there’s fried walleye and potato pancakes headed their way. They’re the only customers and Ralph heads back into the kitchen to get stuff started. Solitude, at least for a little while. Sam stretches his legs out as much as he can under the booth, the low ache of the morning’s hike starting to take hold now that they’ve slowed down. "So," he says, while the laptop boots up.

"The dam," Dean says. He pulls his coat off, awkward between the booth and the table, so he’s in his crumpled suit-jacket, the unbuttoned collar and lack of tie making him look almost informal. "What Will said, about the lake disappearing. If the dates match, that would be a classic presentation of habitat loss-response."

Sam rolls his eyes, but luckily the laptop chimes at him just then. "Sometimes you sound like a Letters thesis on legs, you know that?" he says, and starts typing—Lake Manitoc dam, looking for any press releases or news items he can find.

"This coming from the kid who used to try to trash-talk in Latin," Dean says, nose nearly buried in his coffee mug. Sam scoffs, and Dean shakes his head, eyes closed. "Don’t even, Virgil."
He sighs, and ignores the little smile Dean aims into his mug, and keeps looking. The dam, fracturing and leaking and falling apart, and infrastructure budgets drained down to the last pennies as always and no hope of fixing it. A failed public hearing and a petition with too-few signatures, and a town with too small a population to bother saving. Their food arrives and Sam shoves the laptop away.

"There’s your habitat loss-response," he says, and demolishes his potato pancakes as he explains.

When Sam’s done Dean has finished his fish and stolen Sam's extra tartar sauce, and he licks the side of his thumb, thinking. "Time’s running out, for whatever’s doing this," he says. "But that means that whatever’s doing it knows. That definitely points to a more metaphysical cause than a monster. No mermaid has a psychic connection that strong, not even to her home waters."

Sam drums his fingers on the table. Ralph comes by and refills their mugs, and Sam adds a little tub of creamer to take down the bitterness of long-burnt percolated diner coffee, and watches out the window while he stirs. It’s close to five and the streets are a little busier, the few regular businesses closing up shop as the normal people here head to their homes and families. A youngish couple comes into the cafe and Ralph greets them like old friends, seats them right at the counter, and Sam imagines Andrea and her husband, moving through their life, raising their kid and sneaking off to dates, not knowing what was coming.

"There’s this, too," Dean says. Sam refocuses to find him digging into the coat draped over his side of the booth. He takes out the scroll of Lucas’s drawing and unfurls it over the table, spreading it flat between their two half-empty plates. "What does that look like to you?"

Sam frowns. "Kid’s drawing," he says, shrugging. "House, grass. 2D. Why?"

"This morning," Dean says, tapping the red roof. Sam frowns. "Behind the dock."

The dock. Sam squints at Dean, then at the drawing, and thinks—oh. "Oh, holy crap," he says, blinking.

"Yeah," Dean says. "Carlton house, right?"

"Yeah, it is," Sam says, spreading his hands over the drawing. It’s waxy under his hands, Lucas’s scrawling lines thick and the color laid on heavily. "You think he’s… drawing what he saw? Back then?"

Dean shakes his head. "I don’t know," he says, but slowly. He leans back into the booth, curling his coffee in close to his chest. "Maybe. But—didn’t the article say that Chris and Lucas were on the west shore? They wouldn’t have seen the Carlton house from that angle."

Sam closes his eyes, trying to imagine it. The shore, and the trees, and the way the lake curved and dipped in the forested valley. "So—" he says, and when he opens his eyes Dean’s watching him. "What, then? Lucas is trying to tell us… what? And how?"

He gets another headshake, and then Dean drains his coffee and puts the mug down. Ralph bustles over almost immediately, fills the mug back up to the brim, and Sam smiles thanks. Dean taps his finger on the drawing, the simple triangle roof and the little chimney. "There are cases," Dean says, slowly. "Traumatic experiences can awake latent talents in psychometry, telepathy, clairvoyance, clairsentience."

Sam stares at the picture. "And you think—Lucas? Really?"

"The organization keeps track of individual practitioners," Dean says, matter-of-fact. "But if it’s small-time enough, if other people aren’t affected and there’s no constructive interference in the
psychic wave-field, then… I don’t know. But it’s possible.”

Sam thinks of Maritza, back in Boston, desperate not to be categorized by the Letters. She and little Lucas don’t have much in common, and yet. Will Carlton, standing there, thinking about his little sister and his father, with the red-roofed house behind him in the distance. Even as a kid’s drawing, it’s unmistakable. "If it’s true," Sam says, "If Lucas is somehow getting some kind of psychic information after what happened, then what does the house have to do with it?"

"I don’t know," Dean says, again. He pushes his mostly-eaten fish off to the side and takes his coffee cup in both hands, again. "But if there is some kind of psionic ripple, then we know there must be spirit energy present in the area."

"Makes sense, with unnatural deaths," Sam says. "What do you think we should do?"

*

"Here’s the thing I don’t get," Sam says. Dean gives him a look, the implication clear, and Sam could push him over but it’s uneven footing the woods and he chooses, nobly, to ignore it. "Why these people?"

"What do you mean," Dean says, shoving a branch out of the way. There’s a moon out tonight but not much of one, and here under the trees there’s no light beyond the inadequate circles of their flashlights. Dean keeps almost falling over rocks and his mood isn’t great.

Sam ducks another branch. "Monsters, they’re just looking for easy food, right," he says, and then cuts himself off. Abruptly they’ve run into a fence—finally, the property line of one of the empty fishing cabins they passed on their earlier hike. It’s a low fence and he hops it easily, and holds Dean’s bag while he scrambles over, too. "Then there’s the territorial stuff, and the retribution stuff. Woman killed by an abusive husband, so her spirit turns into a ghost who hates abusive husbands. I get it." Dean makes a little affirmative hum, taking his bag back and leading the way down through the semi-cleared yard past the dark house. "But whatever this is, there just doesn’t seem to be a pattern."

"Well," Dean says, and as he does they push through the last of the encircling woods and come out onto the lake’s rocky shore, the water gleaming black in the inadequate moonlight. He looks back at Sam and pats the side of his bag. "That’s what we’re here to find out."

Sam pulls a pine needle out of his hair. "Nice timing."

Dean shakes his head, starts to get set up. Sam rubs his hands together, chafing them against the cold. Not quite freezing yet, but it’s close, their breath coming foggy and thick in the air, and it’s even colder in the open, by the water’s edge. The moon phase isn’t quite right: an almost-quarter slowly waxing, no real magical aid there at all. Dean says he can make it work, and Sam’s got no choice but to believe him. Maybe he’ll rely on one of those tattoos for help, who knows. Sam puts his hand over the nearly-healed one on his own chest, watching Dean mark out a square on the smooth pebbles of the shore.

They had to wait for hours for the right conditions to call up Sophie’s spirit. They went back to the motel, past the now-empty park, and then it was just working, drinking coffee from the tiny machine in the room and reading about the area. Only one laptop between them, so it was left to Sam to read up on the other drowning deaths in the lake. Some bodies had been recovered; some not. He found as much as he could on Chris Barr and Sophie Carlton, too, hoping to find any kind of connection, but there was nothing he could see—and why would there be, really. An eighteen year old swimmer and a thirty-one year old construction foreman, with nothing in common but where they died.
When Sam’s watch says it’s five minutes to midnight, Dean nods at Sam and he takes the ball of twine when it’s tossed at his chest, making a face at the sogginess. While he’d been reading, Dean had been prepping the reagents for his spell—and soaking the twine in salt water mixed with blood had been part of it. Still, he knows the drill: it’s easy enough to find nine largish stones, and he walks around the square Dean’s already marked out, ringing the ritual area with a binding circle, wrapping the twine around the stones at the prescribed points. A breeze drifts randomly across the water, icy at the back of Sam’s neck, and his hands are freezing under the wet twine. Hopefully the ritual will be quick and Sophie will give them something useful. If she’s even still lingering, here in the lake.

On his knees, Dean pulls out the silver bowl, the black oil, the dried petals of white anemone. His measurements are precise, practiced. Sam stands by his side, watches him grind the petals to grey-black. The water laps gently against the shore and it’s so quiet out here, the stone pestle loud against the bowl. When it’s done he murmurs over it, so low Sam can barely hear, but he knows the gist of the Greek: o lost, o unquiet, tell me the truth you have unwilling been shown. He doesn’t look up, but Sam holds out his hand anyway, and Dean takes it after only a moment of hesitation. They’d argued over this, but Sam held firm—Dean could use his own blood for the binding, but that meant it was Sam’s turn for the calling, and so Dean pulls out his silver ritual-knife and slices a neat line into Sam’s ring-finger, holding his wrist hard so he doesn’t flinch away, and lets the blood spill down into the bowl for five painful, throbbing seconds. Dean repeats the spell-line over the trickle of Sam’s blood, and Sam thinks of that scene, the one Jenn had written a ten-page essay about—from whose bourn no traveler returns—and then Dean unfolds off his knees and swirls the bowl of the oil and crushed flowers and blood and then starts to pour it out, a slow dribble from the center of the ritual space out to the edge of the square, and then out over the keystone in the circle Sam made, and then right up to the lake’s edge, the last drops splashing into the slow-lapping water.

Immediately a bloom of light spills under the lake’s surface, a shine like daylight purling backwards as the waves retreat. Dean crouches and fills the bowl to the rim with water and it gleams black in the moonlight, splashing up against the sides of the bowl but unable to spill over as Dean carries it back into the square and hovers, holding it right over the center. He looks up at the moon, his eyes a faint unreadable sheen in its light, and Sam checks his watch again and—okay, midnight—"Now," Sam whispers, and Dean drops the bowl, and takes a quick step back.

Light races down the black trail, pooling under the lake’s surface and diffusing out in a quick bright flash, bright enough that Sam hopes none of the neighbors were awake to notice. He wraps his bloody hand in the handkerchief Dean gave him and watches the light slowly gather and come back, crowding up against the shoreline and drawing closer, brighter, heading for the line Dean made on the rocks. It’s so odd—silvery-white, bluish from the lake, coalescing slowly until it surges back along the bloodline, the trail steaming under the light’s movement and letting off a smell of saltwater and rot. The light finally reaches the bowl, completes the loop, and the water in it starts to roll, like boiling. Dean sucks in a deep breath, meeting Sam’s eyes across the circle. Sam sets his feet more carefully, mirroring Dean on the opposite side, and then—oh, it worked, the light fills the bowl and the water rises up in a column, so much more than the bowl could contain, towering over even Sam. A glow in the center is held, trapped, like a light seen through too many layers of thick glass.

oh god Sam hears. His teeth hurt intensely for a second, the voice bypassing his ears to vibrate straight into his bones. He sucks in a breath and regrets it immediately, the stench cloying deep into the back of his throat. oh god it says again, where—where is he, where’s my boy, Lucas, Lucas!

Panic hits Sam in the gut but it’s—muted, somehow, and he shakes his head, trying to throw it off. They read about this, growing up, and he’s felt it a few times hunting: a spirit’s energy so strong that the emotions bleed into the living. He frowns, then, but Dean speaks up first.

"Lucas?" he says, and looks at Sam past the roiling column of light. With the spell active it’s brighter
between them now than a bonfire. "Is this—are you Christopher Barr?"

A shape, almost, fledgling in the clear water and then dissolving in the constant roil of the column. it's dark they hear, and across the circle Dean puts his hand over his nose and mouth, his eyes squeezing shut. where—I can’t see him, please, I can’t—

"Christopher," Sam says, and then falters. The panic, the fear, it’s pulsing in the air, and they expected that in a way but he didn’t expect—this. They’d been trying to call Sophie, as the more recent death, just wanted to know from her what she’d seen, if she’d perhaps been trying to communicate, and he doesn’t know what went wrong from Dean’s spellwork, but—well, this is what they have to deal with, now. "Chris," he says, instead, more gently. "Can you hear me?"

it’s dark.

"Yeah, it is," Sam says. "But Lucas is safe. Lucas is okay." A wind surges up over the lake, freezing air sinking straight through Sam’s jeans and making his face ache with cold. "Can you hear me?"

there’s—there’s something here the voice says, and Dean looks up, then behind him at the lake, folding his arms over his chest. I can’t see, I can’t—we’re swimming, we’re swimming and he says Aquaman never had to wear a lifejacket and there’s, there’s something—

"There’s something in the water?" Sam says. Aquaman, christ. He bites the inside of his cheek, tries to keep his mental footing.

nothing in the water the voice says—Chris, the scattered remnants of him, says—but then immediately the boy, the boy, he was crying and he couldn’t—I put Lucas on—it grabbed me, nothing’s grabbing me and it’s freezing, I can’t see

"Lucas was crying?" Sam says. Dean’s watching the bowl at the base of the column, frowning.

The light flares and the haze of panic intensifies, fear setting Sam’s own pulse to pounding, and for the briefest moment—a band of furious, breath-stopping cold, wrapping tight around his wrist and then his ankle, so tight he gasps before it lets go and Chris is saying he’s just a little boy, he can’t—and Sam drags his coat sleeve up to see white finger-prints fading around his wrist. Small, like a little kid’s. On the other side of the circle Dean holds up his own wrist, nodding, while Chris pours terror into them, his moments of death and anguish scattered through the water.

"Chris," Sam says, and finds his voice gone thick and clogged. He rubs his hand over his face, smearing sudden tears. "We promise, Lucas is safe, but was there another boy? A boy, in the water?"

there’s nothing I can—Andrea, I’m so—

The light dims and Sam glances up to see a cloud drifting in front of the moon. The gleam inside the column of water cracks and fades. Immediately the water falls, splashing down to crash and spill out of the bowl, spattering Sam’s legs and Dean’s and flowing out of the circle binding, sinking into the rocky beach. All at once the feeling fades, panic and desperation draining unnaturally away as the spell breaks, but Sam’s pulse still hammers in his throat for a few long seconds while he takes deep, grounding breaths. Andrea. All that anguish.

"You okay?" Dean says.

Sam wipes a hand over his face. "Yeah," he says, and sniffs. "Yeah, I’m fine."

Dean’s looking at him, he knows it, but now with the spell-light gone and the moon mostly hidden his expression isn’t anything Sam can see. Sam picks up the silver bowl, wet and cold and heavy.
"Do you want to try calling Sophie?" he says.

A brief pause, and then Dean says, "No." He stoops—picking up the twine, breaking the ritual circle and recovering the bloody reagents. Never leave yourself behind, that’s what their dad always says. What he used to say. Dean unwraps the twine from the nine stones, winding it around his hand. "The ritual’s unstable without the half-moon and we probably wouldn’t get anything more coherent from her. Anyway, I think we got what we needed to know."


"Without a doubt," Dean says. He drops the twine into his bag and takes the bowl from Sam’s unresisting hands, then buckles the old case and hefts it. He looks out at the water, once again gone black and ordinary, and then claps Sam gently on the shoulder, squeezing the top of his arm for just a moment. "Come on, Sammy, let’s head back."

A quiet trek back through the woods to the trailhead where they parked, moving by low flashlights with barely a word spared between them. Sam can’t get the fear out of his head. Not a fear for his own life, but for his child. For his wife. He doesn’t know what spiritual revenge could merit eliciting that terror, that destruction. When they get back to the car Dean drops his bag in the backseat and takes the wheel, and Sam watches out the window as the silent, sleeping town unfolds around them.

Warm, in the motel. Sam kicks off his wet sneakers in front of the radiator, strips off his soggy socks and jeans, and sits in his boxers and t-shirt on the creaky mattress of the bed he claimed, his skin cold and clammy in the open air. Dean disappears into the bathroom to change, shy like he seems to be, now. Sam doesn’t know why—after the tattoos, it’s not like there’s anything he hasn’t seen. With just the one lamp on the room’s full of shadows, but the radiator’s rumbling and he can hear Dean splashing in the sink. Life, movement. It’s dark. He knows the supernatural, knows the way it can reach up inside and wrench normality apart, but it’s still a shock, every time. He chafes his hands over his bare thighs, his calves. Almost one in the morning. Normally he wouldn’t drink coffee this late, but he doubts he’s going to sleep, anyway.

He’s got the little pot burbling, leaning up against the tiny kitchenette counter, when Dean finally comes out of the bathroom. He’s down to a white undershirt and a pair of Sam’s recently-purchased khakis, dragging just a little on the thin carpet. Sam shakes his head—he’s really got to convince Dean to buy more clothes—but before he can say anything Dean plops down onto the closer bed and folds his hands between his knees.

"A ghost, then," Dean says. He sounds tired. "Probably a little kid."

"Yeah," Sam says. There’s no mark left on his wrist, or Dean’s, but he remembers. An iron grip, but so small, straight from Christopher’s conjured-up memory. He drags his hands through his hair, trying to think. "I don’t remember any children from the list of deaths in the lake, do you?"

Dean shakes his head. "All that means is that it’s not on the record, though." His shoulders slump, his mouth tight.

Running into deaths like this—it’s one thing to read about in the Letters’ records, in monographs on juvenile pain producing restless spirits, and quite another to have it punched right under the breastbone. The coffee beeps and Sam pours it out into the last two paper cups they’ve got. Dean’s looking down at his bare feet and he startles when Sam holds out his cup, but then takes it in both hands. Sam sits down next to him on the bed, not quite touching but close enough that he can feel the heat of his body, and they take a sip in unison. Sam makes a face at the bitterness, but he can’t really expect much from a ten year old Mr. Coffee.
Dean’s running one thumb along the thin folded rim of the cup. "Taking his son out for a swim," he says, finally.

Aquaman, Sam thinks, again. "We’ll do some more research in the morning," he says. "There’s got to be something that connects all this together. We’ll squat in the sheriff’s office if we have to."

He gets a sidelong look for that, but he sees Dean’s lips twitch, anyway. He takes a gulp of the crappy coffee, appreciating the heat as it slides down to his gut. Sometimes he wishes he’d never learned how good coffee can be; it just created problems where there never was one before. They drank pots and pots of it, back in the bunker, going off of their dad’s recipe: stronger is always better. He smiles, briefly, thinking back. "Hey," he says, nudging Dean’s knee with his own. "Remember when Dad took us out, taught us to swim?"

Dean glances at him, clearly surprised. After a second, he says, "I’m amazed you remember that. What were you, four?"

"I was six, thank you very much," Sam says, nudging him a little harder. Dean wobbles, then nudges back, and Sam has to dart a hand under his cup to make sure he doesn’t spill. "At the reservoir in the next county over, and there was that weird green slime up against the shore."

"Pretty sure that’s called algae," Dean says, dry, but the corner of his mouth is turned up. Just that one day, their dad teaching them the basics and even laughing, a little, not minding when they started to horse around in the shallow water. Dean had gotten it faster, of course, bigger and older as he was, but Sam remembers loving it. He wonders if Lucas will ever swim again, and he feels the smile drain off his face.

"Nice work, earlier, by the way," he says, after a moment of quiet. "I forgot about that ritual."

Dean shrugs, looking down into his coffee. "I always liked the Greek methods," he says, effacing as always. "How’s your hand?"

The mention makes the cut throb again and Sam checks the bandage they’d worked up before they got in the car—still holding, just a little blot of red. "It’s fine," he says. If they need to give it a stitch or two it can wait til morning. For the binding Dean had cut himself high on the inside of the elbow, above the angel-banishing tattoo, and Sam takes his arm and twists it so he can see. He’d never get a real answer if he asked. It looks fine, though, already scabbed closed and the skin around it healthy-pink and new. "Guess that healing spell’s working out for you," he says, and gives Dean his arm back.

Dean shrugs again, pointlessly tugging his sleeve down to cover the edge of his luck tattoo where it had been peeking out. "It was enough work, it better," he says, and then hesitates, and takes another swallow of coffee.

Sam frowns. "What?"

"Nothing," Dean says, shaking his head. He glances at Sam and must read his expression right, because he licks his lips and takes a breath. "It’s just—I learned all this theory, all these spells and rituals and methodologies. All that studying. It’s kind of cool to see it actually pay off."

He looks embarrassed, almost. Sam smiles and claps him gently on the back. "See," he says. "Hunting’s not all bad, right?"

Dean snorts. "I could do without the hiking," he says, and Sam laughs.
Even with Dean’s insistence on early rising, they’re late getting started the next morning. Sam’s up first, his annoying internal clock pinging at him, and he blinks up at the shadowy ceiling for a while before he scrubs his eyes with the back of his wrists and swings off the mattress. Dean’s completely buried in pillows in the other bed. He takes a slow, hot shower, careful of the cut on his finger. He’s surprised he slept at all, really, but it always catches up to him. His nearly-nightly dream of Jenn was odd, maybe because of all the caffeine and the weird night before it. Her, burning, as at the surface of a deep and dark lake, while Sam thrashed and kicked and tried futilely to reach her. He scrubs his hair back under the water, shakes his head and turns off the tap. Not hard to see the connection, there.

His jeans and shoes are dry and he dresses up warm, pushing his wet hair behind his ears. They need gas and he needs to stretch a little, see some sunlight and push the night out of his head. "Hey," he says, and Dean makes a muffled grunt into his nest. Sam thwacks the lump in the blankets roughly where he thinks a foot might be, and Dean groans but turns over enough to peer at Sam, irritable. "I know, it’s terrible. I’m heading out, but I’ll bring back coffee. You don’t get any unless you’re upright when I get back."

Dean stares at him, narrow-eyed. After a long moment he says, voice all gravel, "Who do you think is the big brother around here?"

Sam grins at him, and thwacks his leg again, and grabs the keys and goes.

It’s colder this morning than it was yesterday. There are a few people out and about on the streets, a few trucks with more drivers who wave politely when Sam rumbles past them in the Impala. There’s a co-op gas station just like Lebanon’s, on the outskirts of town, and Sam takes the long way back to the motel, checking things out now that he knows the lay of the land. He passes the little school and it must be recess, since kids are all over the attached playground, running around in their bright coats. He pauses at the stop sign and watches for a second, but Lucas isn’t there. No surprise, really. The parking lot at the cop shop is empty but for a slightly rusty sedan, and not much is happening on the main street. He parks again at the motel and walks down to the cafe, hands in his pockets, taking in the sunlight, and when he comes in Ralph smiles at him distractedly, but he’s deep in gossip with—oh. The guy from the motel.

"It’s just a shame," motel-guy says, shaking his head. He’s heavyset, about Ralph’s age. "Poor Bill. Soph, and now this?"

Ralph sighs, but motel-guy notices Sam standing rigid behind him and says, "Oh, Mr. Winchester! Sorry, Ralph, you got a customer," and he grabs his paper and coffee and gives Sam a weak smile as he sidles out, back to actually run his own office, and Ralph says, "Hello again, son, you can sit wherever you like," but Sam shakes his head, stepping up to the counter.

"Just getting coffee and some of those muffins," Sam says, tapping the glass case. Ralph nods and starts to bag them up and Sam drags over the other newspaper on the counter, but there’s nothing remarkable on the front page. "What was that you were talking about, if you don’t mind my asking? Was that Bill as in Bill Carlton?"

"Oh, do you know him?" Ralph says, setting the paper bag on the counter. He sighs, shaking his head. "Poor old Bill. We all went to school together. It’s just terrible what he’s going through."

The hair on the back of Sam’s neck rises and he pulls the two big cups Ralph pours close, but doesn’t take out his wallet. "Ralph," he says. "What else happened?"
It’s nearly eleven by the time Sam gets back to their room, with the coffee only lukewarm in the carrier Ralph gave him. Dean looks up from the laptop and says, "I was about to go looking for you," which would almost be a joke if Sam didn’t know him better—but then, looking at Sam’s face, immediately asks, "What’s the matter?"

Sam sets the carrier on the table and drops heavily into the other chair. "There’s been—Will Carlton is dead," he says, his stomach sour and twisted-up, and Dean blinks at him and sits up straight. Ralph had told him the story, and then the motel manager—Carl, it turns out—had given him nearly the same version, when Sam went to pay for another day and asked careful questions. The police scrambling across town to the Carlton house, last night while Sam and Dean were holed up prepping the ritual, because Bill’s son had had a terrible accident.

"Drowned in the sink?" Dean says. He sinks back in his chair. He’s fully-dressed, in his grey suit with the red tie, and he loosens the knot a little, thinking. "But—how does a civilian even believe that?"

Sam shakes his head. "They’ll say he—had a seizure, or something, that he hit his head and passed out and it was just a terrible freak accident. Most people don’t jump to ghosts as the cause of death." He drags his hair out of his face, leaning hard on his elbows. "Gives us a bigger problem, though."

"The spirit can move," Dean says, slowly. "He can travel, in the water, one way or another. Any water that comes from the lake, at least in theory."

"Yeah," Sam says, "and more than that: it’s got some connection to Bill Carlton. Killed both his kids. That can’t be a coincidence, especially when it’s traveling through the pipes to do it."

Dean’s eyes narrow and drop to the laptop. "Hang on, I read something—" He clicks through a few things and then takes a deep breath. "I was looking up things about Chris Barr’s family, and then the Carlton family, just to see if there was any connection, and found this."

He turns the laptop around on the table and scooches it closer to Sam, careful of their coffee cups. A page from the newspaper, another obituary, but this one a decade old: Marie Carlton, 36. There’s a small, smiling picture, a woman still fit and healthy, happy and gone. A fall in the shower. An unfortunate accident, two children and a loving husband left behind.

"She drowned?" Sam says, looking up.

"It doesn’t say—maybe we could get a police report, from somewhere." Dean licks his lips, drumming his fingers on the side of his paper cup. "Maybe it’s not connected, but now that we know how the spirit can move, and now that Bill’s lost both his kids, it doesn’t seem like it."

"Yeah," Sam says. He tries to imagine. A woman with Marie’s face, standing in the shower and relaxing under the spray, and suddenly the water just—turning, going freezing cold and wrapping all around her like something corporeal, gagging and choking her so she couldn’t scream. Thinking of her kids, her husband, just like Chris. He rubs a hand over his mouth, that sick feeling from before doubling down. It doesn’t matter that there’s no way he could’ve stopped what happened, and that there’s no way they could have known about Will as it was happening. They know now, and stopping more people from dying is the only thing that matters.

"Sam," Dean says, and Sam drags his hand down his chin and lets it drop empty to the table. Dean pushes the laptop lid down between them. "Is there anything else we know about Bill Carlton?"
Sam folds his arms. "Actually, yeah," he says. "Carl, from the office here. I guess he went to high school with Bill. He told me that Chris Barr was Bill’s godson."

Dean takes a deep breath, and blows it out slow. "Okay," he mutters, under his breath. He taps his thumb on the table a few times, looking off out the open window, and then fishes out the pen in his inside jacket pocket and flips one of the printouts over to use the blank side, pushing the unopened bag of muffins out of the way. While Sam watches he makes a little list—Bill Carlton at the head, and then Marie, Chris, Sophie, Will, ticked neatly off with their dates of death beside them. He taps the pen on the paper. "Is there anyone we’re missing?"

Sam shakes his head, staring down at the list of the dead. "I don’t know. I don’t think so. The way it’s going, everyone that Bill Carlton could care about has died, and he might be next."

"Or it will just leave him to stew in his misery." Dean draws a box around Bill’s name, running the pen over and over the same lines so he’s surrounded by thick black. "Being the one left behind can be the absolute worst punishment."

Andrea’s smile flashes through Sam’s head. "Yeah," he says, and then shakes his head. "We don’t know, though. We still don’t have any idea what’s doing this to him. Maybe if we talked to him—"

Dean’s shaking his head, though. "What would we say?" he says. "We’re PhD students studying the watershed, and we think all of your misery is connected to changing habitats? He’s not going to talk to us."

"Should’ve gone with the FBI pretext," Sam says, and Dean just rolls his eyes at him. He’s still doodling on the edges of the list, black boxes and triangles and thick dark lines, just like he used to do on his notes when they used to study back at the bunker. He always had to write a clean copy, if they were going to get work reviewed by their dad or one of the adepts, but all of his drafts were a complete mess, bad drawings and spidery graphs and ink spattered all over. He starts to draw a spiral, looping around and back, blacker and blacker, and Sam blinks. "Lucas."

Dean looks up, frowns. "What about him?"

"He knows something," Sam says. "He’s connected, somehow. He drew the Carlton house, specifically, and he gave it to you. If it’s some kind of psychic connection, or if he saw something and this is the only way he can communicate—either way, we have to figure out what he knows."

There’s a county phonebook, on the kitchenette counter, next to the restaurant menu for the café. Sam stands and grabs it, starts paging through for the Devins listing. Town this small, Sam’s pretty sure the sheriff isn’t hiding his address.

"Why would Andrea talk to us?" Dean says. "We’re in the same situation there as we are with Bill."

The listing found, Sam sticks his finger on it and looks up. "Dude," Sam says, but Dean looks genuinely lost and Sam swallows back his first, more sarcastic response. "The way you got him to respond, even if it was just to give you a drawing. That’s not nothing. Whatever you were saying to him, it must have worked. You just need to keep going."

Dean still doesn’t look convinced, but Sam’s not that worried. He scribbles the address down on the notepad by the phone and shoves the whole pad into his coat pocket. "Come on," Sam says, wheedling. "We can eat in the car. We already kind of have an invitation to the house."

"For dinner," Dean mutters, but he stands up, and grabs his coat off the back of his chair. Sam blows out a quick short breath, triumphant, and grabs the muffin bag before tossing Dean the keys.
Whatever weird connection Dean has with the kid, he’s happy to exploit it—they need to stop this thing, before it decides to go after anyone else. No matter what the spirit went through, no other family should have to face that desperate fear, nor the wrench of loss that comes after.

The Devins house is on the lake, too, set back a little on the slope behind a broad stand of trees. The sheriff’s car isn’t there, probably because he’s dealing with the mess of Will’s death; there is a smallish blue truck, well cared for but getting on in years. Dean pulls in sedately a few feet back from the mailbox and turns off the car, and without the Impala’s rumble it’s very, very quiet.

"Do you think she’ll even let us in?" Dean says.

Sam rubs his hand over his mouth, looking up at the house. It’s nice, though he bets it’s nicer when the surrounding trees aren’t bare and dead. They finished their coffee and wolfed down the muffins on the drive; he wishes he’d thought to bring something to give a reason for her to let them in. Still—"She’s a nice woman," he says. "She’ll at least let us talk."

"I’m glad you’re confident," Dean says, half under his breath.

Sam rolls his eyes and gets out of the car, the creak of the doors loud in the still air. "Tie," he says, and Dean sighs and tugs it off over his head, tossing it into the backseat before they walk up the driveway. There are one or two chalk drawings out here on the concrete, worn away like they’ve been there a long time without being washed. A sailboat; a bicycle; another version of Bill Carlton’s house. He nudges Dean, pointing that one out, and then they’re at the door under the wide wooden awning. He rings the doorbell, and brushes down his coat and hoodie to make sure there aren’t any stray crumbs left over, and then the door opens and Andrea’s standing there, blinking at them in surprise before she smiles and invites them in.

The house is comfortable on the inside—lived in, a little cluttered, but homey and warm despite the circumstances. "I’m surprised to see you two so early," she says, bringing them into the living room, and Sam responds, "We’ve just hit a roadblock on our research, thought we might come to see a friendly face," but he’s looking around, looking for Lucas. Army men on the coffee table and a few more scattered pages of thick crayon art, but no kid, and she’s offering them coffee or tea, pleasant as can be, but he has to interrupt.

"Look, Andrea," he says. She blinks at him, derailed. He takes a deep breath. "I don’t want to impose on your hospitality, or mislead you at all. We’re actually here to talk to Lucas."

Andrea straightens up, taking a half-step back. "Lucas," she says, and glances at Dean. She folds her arms over her chest, slender fingers crumpling the loose sleeves of her sweater. "He doesn’t have a lot to say."

Sam shakes his head. "I know, it’s just—he’s the only one who might know what’s going on in the lake. The only witness to what might have happened."

He gets a frown for that and Andrea shakes her head, looking at the floor. "Nothing happened," she says. "Chris, the others. They just drowned. That’s all."

"It’s more than that," Dean says, quiet. His hands are buried in his coat pockets, his shoulders hunched, but he’s looking right at her, and keeps looking when her eyes lift off the carpet. "Something’s going on, with the lake. There’s something happening here. All we want to do is help."
She stares at him, her eyes wide and dark. "He won’t say anything," she finally says, but it’s weaker, and that means they’ve won.

Sam takes a step closer. "We just want to try, just for a few minutes," he says. She closes her eyes for a second, and nods.

Lucas’s room is upstairs, one of three doors in a neat little line. "Dad moved downstairs to the old den," she says, quietly, while they creak up the stairs. "It’s kind of like our little apartment up here, now."

She pushes at the nearer door, left ajar, and it swings open to reveal a little boy’s bedroom: car posters, a narrow bed with a blue blanket, toys piled in a bin in the far corner. Lucas sits on the floor, hair hanging in his face while he works on yet another picture, doggedly coloring in a dark blue scene. The lake, maybe. Andrea gestures for them to go in and then folds her sweater more tightly across her chest, still not wholly comfortable but trusting them, somehow. Dean blows out a long breath, and steps inside.

"Hi, Lucas," he says, quietly. Sam hangs back in the doorway, with Andrea. Dean steps carefully around a little regiment of army men, set up with their tiny guns pointed at the door, coming close to where Lucas has planted himself in the center of the room. "I wanted to thank you, for the drawing you gave me yesterday."

Lucas scribbles on, not acknowledging Dean at all, and Andrea shakes her head. Sam touches her shoulder, very lightly, and mouths  two minutes  when she looks at him. She sighs, but nods, her mouth a straight tight line.

Dean has gone down to one knee, and he touches one of the pictures in the cast-aside finished pile. Another bicycle, bright red and simple, and another under that. Sam can’t quite see Dean’s face from this angle, but he can catch enough of his profile to see that he’s watching Lucas. Dean’s never been around children, really, or at least none besides Sam when they were little. By rights he shouldn’t be able to make any headway at all with a mute traumatized kid—and yet, he’d managed to get the drawing, earlier, and so Sam nominated him to do the talking when they’d been planning out their play. If it doesn’t work, they have to hope Andrea doesn’t toss them out, because then they really will be at square one.

From his jacket pocket, Dean pulls out the folded picture of the Carlton house. "It’s great work," he says, spreading it open on top of the pile of bicycle pictures. "I knew what it was meant to be, right away. It helped us a lot." Dean leans his elbow on his knee, folding his hands loosely in front of him. "Did you mean to draw Will and Sophie’s house? Is there something you wanted us to see, before anything else happened?"

Lucas grabs another crayon, this one black, and starts making his lake picture darker, and doesn’t speak. Dean settles back on his heel, watching, and for a good five seconds he doesn’t say a thing. Sam shifts his weight, folding his arms over his chest. Maybe it really will all be for nothing.

"It’s scary, I know," Dean says, softly enough that Sam can barely hear him under the hum of the central heating. "The bad dreams, and not being able to say anything about them, because you just can’t figure out how to explain. I remember what that was like. When I was your age I saw something really scary, too."

Sam frowns, and from the corner of his eye he knows Andrea’s looking at him. Dean’s hands squeeze tighter together and he drags his thumb along the side of his palm, but his voice is steady.

"Something happened to my mom," he says, quiet, and under Sam’s heart something turns over. "I
saw it happen. I didn’t want to talk for a while, either. For a long time. She used to talk to me every
night before I went to sleep, though, and she used to tell me about all the things she wanted for me,
all the things I could be. Most of all, she wanted me to be brave. I finally had to try, for her. It’s hard.
Sometimes it’s really hard, but I do everything I can to be brave, like she wanted me to be."

He ducks his head, quiet for a second, and Sam has to take a deep silent breath, heat rimming his
eyes. Beside him, Andrea’s fingers are covering her lips, and Lucas is still silently coloring.

"I know it’s scary," Dean says. He puts one hand down, fingers just touching the red roof on the
drawing of the house. "But maybe, if you think about your dad, and what he might want for you.
Maybe he wants you to be brave, too."

The endlessly scribbling crayon pauses. Andrea sucks in an audible breath. Lucas looks up, right at
Dean, making eye contact. His expression is still blank but his eyes are focused and it’s amazing, the
difference it makes. He blinks once, and then again, and then shuffles through the pile of his
drawings, pushing aside bikes and lakes and deep worrying black swirls until he finds a slightly
bigger one, dragging it out of the mess and holding it out for Dean to take, making eye contact again.

"I can’t believe it," Andrea says, almost a whisper.

Dean’s not looking up. Sam swallows, hard, and then has to clear his throat anyway. He touches
Andrea’s elbow, and she drags her eyes away from where Lucas sits coloring, shakes her head. She
takes a few steps back, into the hall, but she doesn’t lead the way down the stairs again.

"What did he give you?" she says.

Dean holds out the picture. The red bike, again—but another house, yellow this time, a white church
big in the background. There’s a little boy standing next to the bike, a smile wide on his crayoned
face, and Sam’s stomach twists. Andrea squints at it, but shakes her head. "I don’t get it," she says.
"How is this supposed to help? What does this have to do with—with animal attacks, or the
ecosystem, or whatever you’re studying?"

"I don’t know," Sam says, and the honesty must shine through because Andrea looks at him,
bewildered but not upset. "We just don’t want the situation to get worse. Maybe, somehow, Lucas
saw something, and maybe this is part of it."

"A kid on a bike," Andrea says, almost skeptical but for the way her eyes keep skipping back to
watch Lucas, through the open doorway.

"Bikes and the lake," Sam says. He wonders how many identical drawings are scattered all over this
house. Dark water and houses with who knows what kind of secrets. Andrea shakes her head, but
doesn’t say anything, and he wonders if she’s thinking the same thing. "Do you want us to let you
know, if we find anything?"

"My dad will want to know," she says. She puts her hand to her head, curled knuckles dragging hard
along her forehead before she sighs. "I just want my son to be okay."

"He will be," Dean says. He bites his lip, like he didn’t mean to say it, and rolls the picture into
another scroll, eyes on his hands. Andrea watches him, expression almost hungry. "It might take a while, but it’ll come. It just takes time."

It doesn’t sound as much like a platitude, from Dean’s mouth. Andrea folds her lips between her teeth, and after a minute she nods, and looks back at Lucas. Between the little soldiers and the stacks of crayon art around him, he’s hemmed in on all sides.

They let themselves out of the house, and out into the thin sunlight of midday. A few clouds gather over the forested hills around the lake, but it’s a clear day, probably about as warm as it’ll get for the next few months. Dean hands over the furled picture and heads for the driver’s side and Sam follows, quietly, mind back in that dim little bedroom.

Fire, when he closes his eyes. Her empty hands, the blood on her belly. That shock and terror that lands hard in his gut, every time he wakes up. The way she’s just—gone. Less than a month and he can walk around, he can be normal, but every day is hard. The Impala rumbles to life under Dean’s hands and he pulls away from the curb, rolling smoothly down the empty lake road, and Sam watches him for a few seconds and then has to turn away, staring out the window, because somehow he’d just never—thought about this. Not really. When he was a kid it was always the bunker, the obligation, the long trapped years and the way their dad expected obedience without question, and Dean had seemed… awkward, nerdy. Sad, really, in ways Sam alternately pitied and wanted fiercely to fix. He’d laid the blame for it entirely at their dad’s feet, and he’d never had a reason to change his mind.

They pull into town. Dean seems to be pointing them back toward the motel, though they didn’t discuss it. Sam watches a woman walking down the sidewalk with her toddler tugging at her hand and babbling something that’s making her smile, and all he can think of is Lucas, silent, and now—Dean. Sam had been a baby when they moved into the bunker and he doesn’t really know anything about that time. There aren’t any stories, like the ones Jenn’s parents would tell from when their kids were growing up. They have a few pictures, from when they were little, so Sam knows what Dean looked like back then. Tiny, big-eyed, blond-haired, sitting solemnly for the camera with Sam a miniature bundle clutched in Dean’s lap, the two of them so little in one of the big leather armchairs in the bunker. *I didn’t want to talk*, Dean said, and it’s all too easy to imagine. Robbed of everything familiar, dropped suddenly into a darker world. *Something scary.* Like it was as simple as that. He presses the back of his hand to his mouth, closes his eyes. It’s not fair. It’s just—not remotely, remotely fair.

They pull to a stop, in front of their room. Dean turns off the engine and sighs. "We need more coffee."

Sam presses his knuckles tight against his teeth for a second, then drags his hand through his hair and opens his eyes. "We need a drink," he says, and Dean gives him a startled look across the seat. Sam amends, "Okay, both," but neither of them move to get out of the car.

There are only two other cars in the lot and no signs of life in the other rooms. They could eat something substantial, but the muffins from earlier are sitting like lead in the pit of Sam’s belly. There’s got to be a bar, somewhere in town, although maybe they’d get some looks if they showed up at one o’clock in the afternoon.

Dean picks up the drawing, unrolling it again and spreading it out over the steering wheel. "You think this is the spirit?"

There aren’t really details, of course. Just that smile, the mysterious red bike that crops up in so many of the pictures. "Probably," Sam says, and searches the picture. Yellow house, church. "We should check it out, either way. He gave it to you for a reason." Dean nods, clearly thinking, and Sam says,
"Dean."

Dean looks at him. He seems tired, but they’ve both been tired for a month and that’s nothing new. There are so many questions Sam could ask, but the way to say them—how to get them out without hurting both of them, dredging up things they’ve left so long unsaid—it’s not coming to him. He drops his eyes to the drawing. "What did you say," he finally says, "to get Lucas to communicate, that first time?"

It’s chickening out, sort of. He actually does want to know, especially now. Dean raises his eyebrows. "I drew him a picture," he says, and smiles a little. "Impressed him with beautiful art of my annoying baby brother."

Sam rolls his eyes and shoves Dean’s elbow, grabbing the picture when Dean moves to fend him off. His brother thinks he’s funny. In a lot of ways, Sam thinks, shoving out of the car, that’s the saddest thing about him.

The phonebook in their room provides a list of churches in the county; they take down the addresses and move slowly through each one with their map as a guide. They eat in the car, sandwiches wrapped up from the ever-friendly Ralph, and with a Stones tape from the glovebox on low it’s not that bad a drive.

They find the subject of Lucas’s picture at the fourth address on their list. Sam puts the car in park and they get out into the chilly breeze, Dean holding up the paper so they both can see. St. Ambrose Catholic Church quiet in the background and just across the street the little yellow house, battered and less cheerful than in the simple colorful drawing, but still being cared for. The fence needs repainting and there’s no bright red bike leaned up against the gate. Sam wonder how long it’s been.

"What’s the pretext here?" Dean says, under his breath, and Sam shakes his head. The watershed isn’t going to work, for this one. He holds out his hand for the picture and squares his shoulders, taking a deep breath. There’s an echo here, of hunts in the past. He’s pretty sure of what they’ll find.

The doorbell gongs lowly, somewhere deep in the house, when he presses the buzzer; it’s less than two minutes before the door creaks open, and an old lady blinks at them behind her old-fashioned mesh screen door. "Hello there," she says, voice thin, and yeah. Sam knows how this is going to go.

"Hello, ma’am," he says. It’s not hard to make it gentle. "This might seem a little strange, but we found this drawing and we were wondering—is this your house?"

She opens up the screen door, easy as that, and reaches out a blue-veined hand for the picture. He hands it over, holding the door for her so it doesn’t swing closed on the spring, and watches her frown down at the paper. She puts her hand to her mouth, after a moment, and he bites the inside of his cheek. "Why, what a thing," she says, soft, and blinks up at Sam in amazement.

"We recognized the house," Sam says. Unnecessarily, maybe. She’s seems like she’s barely paying them attention and he exchanges a glance with Dean. "Ma’am, do you know that little boy?"
She nods, jerkily. "That’s—that’s Peter," she says, softly. "That’s my boy."

Pieces lock into place, immediately, and Sam swallows hard. He puts a careful hand on her shoulder and she blinks at him again with swimming eyes, but she takes a seat on the flowery sofa, the picture still gripped hard in her hand, and tells a story.

Her son. A sweet boy, quiet, but he sure could get up to trouble with those little friends of his. In 1970 he was twelve years old, tiptoeing his way toward being independent, but he knew he had to come straight home after school. Straight home, to do his homework, and then he could explore anywhere he wanted on that bike of his, as long as he was home again by the time the streetlights started to come on. That day, she’d made a cobbler with the last of the summer blackberries as an after-school surprise and she’d been waiting for him to get home, but he never came. She’d had a lashing planned, but the hours dragged on and he still never came, and then the streetlights came on, and he never came, and then she worried. She called around to Jolene Robertson, and Connie Barr, and Roberta, and Millie, but no one had seen him. Peter’s father came home and she sent him right back out to drive the streets, calling out the window, and with her heart a thumping strange weight in her chest she finally dialed the police and told them that she didn’t know where her boy was, and could anyone come and help, please. She was sure he was just lost, but what if he were hurt, she thought. What if he’d fallen down on that damned bike of his and broken his leg, and he was stuck on some lonely dirt lane with no one to help him.

"We never found him," she says. No tears are falling but she’s holding a tissue crumpled up, close to her mouth. "He—just disappeared. Like a hole opened up and swallowed him."

Dean’s sitting on the armchair across from them, his elbows leaned hard onto his knees while he stares down at the carpet. Sam says, "I’m so sorry," and he means it but it hardly matters. He lays a hand flat on her hunched back and she doesn’t acknowledge it, her eyes locked on the drawing but her mind clearly drawn back to thirty-five years ago.

"I kept his room," she says, finally, voice distant, and wobbles up to her feet, going slowly to the stairs.

Sam follows, Dean behind him, as she makes it to the top and opens the first door off the landing, and—it’s clean. The carpet vacuumed, the bed made. There’s not even the mustiness of a place long-uninhabited and the idea of her coming in once a week to air everything out, clean up the dust, clutches like a fist in Sam’s belly. Old magazine pictures are tacked up and yellowing on the walls; race cars and a baseball mitt, books and now-vintage comics stacked neatly by the bed. A small battalion of little plastic army men stand proud on the dresser and Dean touches one, gently, while the old lady stares at or through the narrow bed, her hand on her cheek.

The dresser’s cluttered, around the army. More comics, more pages of what looks like old homework. Pictures, tucked into the dim mirror: school gatherings, a group of boy scouts, and then, at last, a little boy in a baseball cap, grinning proudly out over the top of his bike’s handlebars, another kid standing nearby and smiling, too. Sam plucks the picture out of the mirror, flips it over for both him and Dean to read: Peter Sweeney and Billy Carlton, 1970. Bill.

Sam flips the picture back over while Dean takes an audible deep breath beside him, and studies the faces of both boys. Something happened. Instinct, deep below his gut, tells him that Bill knows what it was.

"I wish I’d died," Mrs. Sweeney says, distantly. Sam looks up and finds her eyes on the picture he’s holding, her expression still with old grief. She sits on the bed, with a creak of ancient springs, and sighs. "It would have been easier."
Dean’s driving the speed limit but he’s rigid in his seat, his face grim as he pilots them back around
the lake. "Bill Carlton," he says, shaking his head.

Sam drags a hand over his face. "Yeah." They’d left the drawing with Mrs. Sweeney, because they
didn’t really need it anymore but also because Sam couldn’t imagine trying to take it out of her pale,
crabbed hand. All those years of waiting grief. He wonders what happened to her husband. "If
Peter’s the spirit—"

"Is there any doubt?" Dean cuts in, glancing over the seat.

happened? Did he hide it, and Peter’s trying to punish him for that?"

Dean shakes his head, but he says, "Maybe." They turn onto the lakeside road, cutting through the
stands of tall trees to the south side of the lake, where poor Will had pointed out the red house.
There’s a grim, almost angry cast to Dean’s mouth. "All this dying, and for what."

That’s always the question, and there’s never any real answer. Sam drags his hands through his hair
and tries to think of how they’ll even frame this, to Bill. He wishes they’d spoken to him earlier,
before Will’s death. Two children gone in the space of two weeks, his wife gone long before, and he
can hardly imagine the wreck they’ll find waiting in a suddenly-empty house. Or maybe— "Do you
think Peter will go after Bill?"

"Saving him for last?" Dean blows out a short sharp breath, makes another turn, and there’s the
house at last, the red roof peeking through the trees. They pull up onto the dirt driveway and Dean
kills the engine, and then shakes his head again. "It’d make sense. And what, do we save him?"

Sam blinks, but Dean’s already shoving open his door with a squeal of hinges, getting out, and
Sam’s got no choice but to follow. "Dean," he says, frowning, but Dean’s already marching up to
the house’s door, knocking solidly on the wooden frame.

No answer. The gauzy curtain inside the windows doesn’t show any movement, but there’s a truck
with a bed full of fishing gear still sitting in front of the cabin. Dean backs up, frowning up at the
house, and Sam jerks his head—they split up, Sam going left and Dean going right, both of them
circling the building. There’s a weird sound, off in the distance, like power tools. Sam’s looking for
an open window, another door, any indication that Bill’s home (and not dead—god, taking a shower
or just in the sink like his poor kid)—but there’s a muffled thump on the other side of the yard, and
then Dean calls out, "Sam!"

He runs around the house to Dean’s voice, and Dean’s standing at the foot of the dock, his mouth
open, because there’s a boat speeding out into the center of the lake. An older guy, thickset, greying
hair, and turning up the little motor on his boat. That’s the hum Sam heard. "Bill!" he shouts, running
down the dock. "Bill Carlton! Come back!"

He’s bellowing, as loud as he can, but either Bill can’t hear him over the boat’s motor or he chooses
not to. Dean runs up behind him, his heels striking loud on the wood of the dock, and he grabs
Sam’s arm, yanking him hard so that he’s forced back another step from the edge, farther from the
water. Sam lets him, but he shouts again for Bill, and again, because—they were going to save him
—and then the hum of the motor cuts out, a little cloud of smoke sputtering up from the boat not all
that far in the distance. Bill looks over the edge of the boat, into the lake, and just like that the boat
splits clean in half. "God," Dean mutters, next to him, and Sam doesn’t even have time to shout
again before Bill sinks straight down through the two halves of the boat and disappears without even
a splash. The boat pieces bob pointlessly for a few seconds and then start to sink, and Sam starts forward ready to dive in before Dean grabs him again, his fingers digging in bruisingly hard to Sam’s arm.

"Sammy, no," he says, pulling Sam bodily back. Sam’s off balance and he stumbles, and they almost go down to the bare wood of the dock. Dean staggers but bears both of their weight for a second, and when he speaks again it’s right over Sam’s shoulder, sharp and loud. "Don’t you dare. He’s gone."

"We don’t know that!" Sam says, fighting to find his feet, but—it’s pointless, of course. There’s not even a ripple in the lake, the white fiberglass disappeared into the black of the freezing water, and Sam stares at where Bill Carlton was for a long awful moment before he yells out fuck at the lake, and then grinds his fist tight into his forehead.

"Sam," Dean says. Sam yanks his arm out of Dean’s grip, and Dean lets him, that time. They stand there and Sam’s got his eyes screwed shut, his knuckle pushed in so tight against his skull that it hurts. After a long moment, Dean touches his shoulder, almost hesitant. "There was nothing we could do."

Sam takes a deep breath and drops his hand, and looks out at the still, waiting lake. How pointless. "We’ve got to call the cops," he says, finally, and turns on his heel, heading back to land. It takes a few seconds before Dean follows.

The sheriff’s cars show up quickly. Devins takes charge of the scene, directing Roger and a younger deputy they hadn’t met to cordon off the house and start looking at evidence. Sam doesn’t know why; there isn’t any. Not any that would go into a police report, at least. Sam and Dean sit on a stack of corded firewood by the side of the house and wait. Dean’s knee keeps jogging, nervously, but there’s nothing to be worried about. They have no connection to the town, and it’s unlikely that they’ll even be booked. Their names won’t go onto any kind of real record and there’s no way the Letters will even notice. It’s just going to be a long, wasted night ahead. If Sam felt up to it, he’d explain: welcome to hunting.

Finally, Devins comes up to them. He’s pale, his manner sharp and abrupt. "I’m going to need you two to come down to the station," he says, almost threatening.

Sam nods, doesn’t stand up. Devins has his hand resting on his service weapon and looks like he wants them to pick a fight. "Of course, Sheriff," he says, calm. He gets a narrowed eye before Devins whips around and marches back to the house, going in the open door and saying something they can’t hear to Roger.

"What’s that about?" Dean murmurs. Sam shrugs and unfolds off their makeshift seat. It doesn’t matter, at this point. They’ll be out of here soon enough.

They drive back around the lake, into town, to the sheriff’s station. The day’s dimming, winter stealing the light from the sky earlier and earlier. They wait with a nervous, fidgety Deb in the same plastic chairs. Sam wishes, again, for a real drink, but all Deb has to offer them is shitty police coffee.

Devins comes in with a swirl of cold air, smelling like cigarettes, a cloud over his face. "Come on," he says, jerking his head at the two of them, and completely ignores Deb as he goes into his office, the door slamming into the wall with a rattle of blinds. Dean’s gone completely blank-faced, expression smooth as snow, and Sam takes a deep breath before he follows Devins in. Lying to authority is second-nature, but right this second he doesn’t really feel up to it.
They get a wave of a hand at the two seats in front of his desk and they take them. Devins shucks his big coat and slings it over the tree in the corner, drags his hand over his face, and then drops heavily into the swivel chair behind his desk. "I need to ask you two some questions," he says, but there’s none of that same almost-angry energy running through him. He just sounds tired.

They go through the motions. Their names, what they’re doing here. Sam repeats the lie about the watershed, about looking for an environmental cause to the disappearances. They were scouting along the lakeside, searching for clues as to the behavior of local fauna, when they saw the fisherman go out onto the lake. His boat must have capsized. There must have been a malfunction with the motor. He went over the side and he didn’t come up again. Perhaps a stroke. Perhaps a heart attack. Too far out, by the time they got to shore, to the end of the dock, and he’d been down too long, and there was just nothing they could do.

Devins isn’t even pretending to take notes by the time Sam finishes. He sits with his hand covering his mouth, staring down at the desk. "Goddamn," he mutters, finally, and then leans over and hauls open his desk drawer, producing a bottle of Jameson. He pours a healthy glug into his coffee mug and slings it back in two swallows, face twisting at the taste. He looks down into the empty mug, when he’s finished, and sighs. "Too bad you kids aren’t too quick off the jump," he says, bitter.

Sam bites the inside of his cheek. He’ll take accusations of ineptitude, of cowardice. Whatever works. "We’re just real sorry about the whole thing," he says. He means it, which puts maybe the right amount of regret into his voice.

Devins looks up from the mug and squints at him, his face hard, but then there’s a perfunctory knock and the door to the inner office swings open, and Andrea’s standing there. "Dad?" she says, and hardly gives the two of them a look. "Dad, Deb called. Is it true, about Bill?"

He gets to his feet. "Yeah, honey," he says, with a sigh, and she’s around the desk and hugging him, just like that. His arms go around her shoulders, squeeze tight, and he gives both them a look and jerks his head at the door. Sam was just waiting for the excuse and gets to his feet immediately, Dean following, as they escape out into the lobby.

Roger’s not back, nor the younger deputy. Deb’s on the phone and gives them just a quick glance before she curves her shoulders and huddles down into her call. From the snatches of her side of the conversation she must be spreading the word about Bill Carlton. Not exactly an airtight ship, this sheriff’s office.

Lucas is sitting in one of the lobby chairs, arms wrapped around himself and rocking back and forth. Deb’s paying him no attention and Andrea’s still inside, but the kid’s clearly distressed, more animated than Sam’s ever seen him. "Lucas?" Dean says, going down to one knee, but Lucas doesn’t look at him, just shaking his head as he teeters on the chair. Dean puts a careful hand on his shoulder, looks up to Sam.

Andrea comes out of the office, then, her eyes rimmed wet. She frowns and heads right for Lucas, crouching down next to Dean. "Baby, what’s wrong?" she says, but Lucas only shakes his head again and lets out a low whine—the first sound Sam’s heard him make, and it’s not pretty. Dean stands up to give Andrea more room, but before he can move away Lucas darts a little hand out and fists it into the heavy weight of Dean’s peacoat, tugging to keep him close.

"Winchester," Sam hears, and turns around to see Devins standing in the doorway. He looks tired, but maybe a little more settled after talking to his daughter. "You two are free to go. Just leave a number with Deb in case I need to contact you again for more details."

Lucas is quiet and Sam’s blocking his view of the chairs, so maybe he doesn’t notice the little tableau
in the lobby; he goes back into his office regardless, closing the door quietly behind himself.

"Honey," Andrea’s saying, quietly, "what’s the matter, can you let me know, please? What’s wrong?"

Lucas is silent, of course, but he keeps his hold on Dean’s coat. Sam scribbles down a fake number for Deb, who finally disengages from her call while he’s falsifying info for her. "Andrea, you need a hand?" she says, ignoring the form Sam pushes toward her.

"We can help," Dean says, unexpectedly. He touches Lucas’s shoulder, looking down at the top of his head. "It’s no trouble, if you need it."

Sam frowns. They were going to get out of here. Andrea looks up at Dean, though, and after a few seconds she nods. "Yeah," she says, and smooths Lucas’s hair back from his face to see the tracks of tears on his cheeks. "If you—if you could, yes."

Deb plants her hands on her hips, looks like she might object, but Andrea stands up smoothly and says, "Tell my dad to take his time, okay?" She smiles, but it’s strained. "I know there’s a lot for him to do here, but we’re going home, we’ll be fine."

"We can follow you in our car," Dean says, and of course it’s aimed at her but he’s looking at Lucas. "We’ll be right behind you."

She nods and picks Lucas up, not straining under his weight although she’s so slender she looks like she could break in half. Lucas keeps hold of Dean’s coat as long as he can, face distressed, before he turns it into his mother’s shoulder. They follow the two of them out to the parking lot and she loads Lucas into her truck, and Dean leads the way to the Impala and gets it turned on before Sam gets the privacy to object, and by then they’re already backed up, waiting to follow Andrea.

"What the hell, man," Sam says.

Dean flicks a look over the seat, but then Andrea’s driving and he rolls forward to follow her, eyes on her taillights. "We’re helping," Dean says, like that’s the end of it.

Sam rolls his eyes. "I can see that," he says, "but why? The case is over. It’s done." Not that they did much good, in the end. A waste, from start to finish.

Dean shakes his head, though, his brow furrowed. "I don’t know," he says. They make the turn onto the lake road and he has to turn the headlights on, twilight very dark under the surrounding trees. "Something’s up with Lucas."

"Yeah, he’s a kid and his mom’s upset and he’s freaking out," Sam says, slumping back into the bench seat. "Sad, but it’s not our problem, not anymore."

He gets a frown, that time. "He’s really scared," Dean says, his eyes back on the road, his voice quiet. "If his behavior was because of psychic interference from Peter, and if Peter’s done with his revenge on Bill, then why is Lucas still upset?"

They pull up to the Devins house, behind Andrea’s truck. Dean turns off the engine and gets out, right away, heading up the driveway to where Andrea’s shadowed form is already pulling Lucas out of the cab. Sam sits for a minute, letting his head drop back against the seat. He doesn’t want to do this. He doesn’t want to make nice with a civilian, follow up, make sure their tracks are covered. Not now. There’s a blaze of light, from the house, the front door open and the porch light on, and when he turns his head Andrea’s ushering Lucas inside, head bent down to his level, and Dean’s right behind them. He turns, looks back at where Sam’s stalling, and Sam sighs and shoves open his door.
He’ll back Dean’s play—it’s the least he can do, really, after dragging him up here for nothing—but then they’re gone. Back to the search for their dad, where at least they might be able to make a difference.

Andrea had been halfway through a simple dinner when she got the call from Deb; Dean takes over finishing it while she takes Lucas upstairs and tries to calm him down. Sam takes a stool at the kitchen counter and flips through their dad’s journal. If he’s stuck here, he might as well try to use the time.

He’s distracted, though. He keeps reading the same paragraph over and over, some hunt from ten years ago described in a code he’s only slowly learning to decipher, but he’s not taking anything in. He scrubs a hand through his hair and leans his elbows hard on the counter, watching Dean instead. The pasta had to be scraped out of the pot and dumped and a new batch is waiting to be started; Dean’s taken off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, and he’s chopping bell peppers with a small frown of concentration. The tattoos on his left arm keep peeking in and out of view and Sam finds himself staring at the angel-banishing sigil, mind miles away.

"When I was in Oregon," Sam starts. Dean’s head jerks up and he blinks, the knife motionless on the cutting board. Sam cuts his eyes away, folding his arms on the counter. "There was this string of deaths, in Linn County. No real pattern to the victims, age or gender or anything, just that they were correlated with the moon phases."

He can tell Dean’s staring at him. "A werewolf."

Sam shrugs. "I checked into it." He’d actually been tracking the pattern long-distance, from their ancient computer in the bunker—reading up on places he might want to go when he finally got out and he found a hunt, instead. He’d been excited, then. "It was a male, a loner. I tracked him down and followed him until he shifted. Caught him in a park before he could take out another jogger." He glances up and Dean’s bracing himself on the counter, looking sort of nauseated. "I got it in the heart on the third shot," he says. He smiles, though it’s thin. "All that practice down in the shooting range paid off."

There’s a pause, and Dean takes a visibly deep breath, his shoulders rising, before he starts chopping up the peppers again. "Guess so."

Sam watches the steady rocking of the knife. "I dragged the corpse to the bed of the truck I was driving, took it out to the dump and burned it, took care of everything." No evidence, nothing left behind. He’d been reading reports from hunters since he could pull records off the shelves with his own hands; he knew the process. The body had stunk to high heaven, the smoke column leaping high above the dump, but it was nothing but ash when he was done and he stashed the remains inside a folded tarp, deep where no one would find it. "I stayed in the town another couple of days. Nobody put out a missing report for the wolf—I guess he didn’t have any friends—but no one else went missing, either. The moon started to wane and everyone was safe. It felt like—" He shakes his head, chewing on the inside of his lip.

Dean starts the water boiling for the pasta and dumps peppers, onions, sliced-thin garlic into a pan to sauté. The kitchen’s homey, bright under the big central light even though the rest of the house is nearly dark. There’s no sound filtering in from upstairs and Sam wonders if Andrea managed to soothe Lucas to sleep. Dean pulls a wooden spoon out of the old-fashioned jar on the counter and stirs the vegetables around in the pan, his back to Sam. "Sounds like you helped," he says, after a too-long pause. "That’s good, right?"
"Yeah." He runs his tongue over the spot he’d been chewing. It’ll get a sore, if he keeps it up. He sighs, and closes the journal, his hand flat on the leather cover. "That’s all I wanted to do, here. We couldn’t even save Bill."

There’s another pause. Dean dumps a few handfuls of spaghetti into the water and a surge of steam roils up. He tosses in a palmful of salt, drizzles in a bit of olive oil, and then turns around, bracing his hands behind him on the counter next to the stove. He’s got a knot between his eyebrows but it looks more like he’s just thinking, not like he’s upset.

"You know how many hunting files I’ve read?" he says, eyes steady on Sam. "Maybe—eight thousand? Ten? I don’t actually know, they start to blur." He folds his arms over his chest, leaning back against the counter. "Two-thirds of those, the hunters couldn’t save everybody. In half, more civilians died before the perpetrator was even identified. At least a quarter, nobody was saved. They were just—identified." He shrugs, with a humorless quirk to his mouth. "Sometimes we’re all just beholders."

Sam looks away. There’s a sourness in his belly, grim and ugly. He’s always hated that word.

"Sammy," Dean says. "So, we didn’t save Bill. Maybe that’s on us. There’s still something we might be able to do for Lucas."

"What," Sam says, flat, but then there’s the sound of feet on the stairs. Dean rolls down his sleeves, quickly, and Sam ties the cord back around the journal, and by the time Andrea comes into the kitchen Dean’s back to sautéing the vegetables, steam rising up over the stove.

"Everything all right?" Sam says, polite.

Andrea looks between them both. She looks tired. "Sort of," she says. To Dean’s back, she says, "You didn’t have to cook, I could’ve just heated up something from the freezer."

Dean shrugs, eyes on the sauce he’s putting together. "You did invite us to dinner," he says, quietly.

Sam raises his eyebrows, but Andrea huffs out a little laugh. "Usually the host’s supposed to do the cooking, I think," she says, but then follows right up with: "Thanks. For helping."

She’s a nice woman, and she’s been dealt a terrible hand. Her arms are folded protectively over her stomach again, slender wrists frail and white where they’re peeking out of her sweater, and Sam sighs. "It’s no trouble," he says. Dean glances at him, over his shoulder, and then looks back down into the pan. Sam offers Andrea a smile. "You look like you could use a glass of wine."

She blinks at him. "I don’t know about wine," she says, smiling, "but we could all use a beer."

Andrea takes a portion of the pepper pasta upstairs to Lucas. Sam and Dean eat quietly at the dining table, just off the living room, the big windows dark and full of night. From inside the house it’s impossible to see the lake past the trees, but it’s like a stone pulling at the edge of Sam’s thoughts, a weight he can’t shake. He drinks the lager Andrea offered, and then Dean slides his over after a few sips and Sam drinks that one, too. After a while Andrea comes back downstairs, her face tight, but she eats her dinner then, finally, between long swallows off her own bottle. Sam tries to keep the conversation light, but the only option is to talk about the past, and his past is almost as full of lies as Dean’s. She’s interested enough in Boston that that fills a few minutes, since she’d only previously spent time in Madison, and Milwaukee.

"Chris always said there wasn’t much reason to leave Wisconsin for anything," she says, with a soft
smile. "He just didn’t want to spend his vacations doing anything but fishing. Him and Bill, racing to see who could catch the most bluegills."

"Bill was his godfather, is that right?" Sam says.

She nods, both hands curled around her bottle. "All of our families knew each other," she says. "Chris’s dad and Bill and my dad all went to the same school, they were in the same scout troop, everything. Chris’s dad died when he was pretty young—stomach cancer, I think—and Bill looked out for him. Did the stuff a dad would do." There’s a runnel of grief in her voice, but she’s still smiling, the memory soft in her eyes.

"He sounds like a good guy," Dean says, hands folded on the table. Sam glances at him, but Dean’s just watching her downturned face.

She nods again. "He really was," she says, and sniffs. Her eyes are just barely damp, when she looks up. "Do you guys mind if I ask for one more favor?"

"What do you need?" Sam says.

"I’m just—" She shakes her head and looks up at the stairwell with its dimmed lights. "This is silly. I just want to get washed up, get ready for bed, but I’m worried about Lucas—I don’t want him to call out or something and I can’t answer.”

Sam waves a hand. "We can stay," he says. Dean blinks at him, but looks back to Andrea with a nod. Sam gives her another smile, but he means this one. "Take your time."

It’s only eight o’clock. Andrea turns on the television, muted and set to the weather channel, and leaves them for upstairs with a tired smile. It might snow, over the Thanksgiving weekend. The country’s getting colder and colder. Sam taps his thumb on the side of his bottle, looking out the window into the dark. There’s quiet between them, for a long minute, before they hear the rush of water in the pipes, upstairs. "I wonder what Bill knew," Sam says.

Dean shakes his head. They can only speculate, really. If this were a case that the Letters had set a hunter to there would be a report, a concrete motive and context documented even if further investigation were required. Maybe Dean will note all this down, for his own records. Sam smiles, briefly. A little corner of a shelf, tucked away where no one will notice: 


Dean pushes back from the table with the scrape of his chair on the hardwood. "Come on," he says, clapping a hand on Sam’s shoulder. Sam sighs, but then—Dean did cook. Hard to get out of dishes by claiming Greek homework, this time. They find tupperware and put away leftovers, and Dean takes his turn flipping through the journal while Sam works on the washing up.

He scrubs at the sauté pan, wrist-deep in slightly-too-hot water, and while he works at a recalcitrant spot his attention wanders. There’s just one drawing magneted to the fridge: a picture of this house, with a little row of stick-figure people. A pink woman with a triangle skirt and a big blue man with a beard, their stick-hands holding onto the stick-arms of a tiny person between them, and beside them a brown stick man with a hat and a wide curve of smile. No bicycles or dark voids to be found. "Do you think Lucas will recover?" Sam says, rinsing off the pan.

"It’s hard to say," Dean says, behind him. Sam glances over his shoulder and Dean’s staring down at the open journal. "If the psychic interference is over—I don’t know. There are tests I can run. The battery for psychic ability isn’t that time-consuming, at least for the first four levels. Beyond that…"
Sam shakes his head, scrubbing their handful of used silverware clean. “I can’t imagine that he’s some super powerful psychic, if he’s psychic at all,” he says. “So, what. If you do the battery, would you log him with the Letters? What would the excuse for that even be?”

Dean sighs. "Sam—" he starts, but then there’s—thumping, on the stairs. Sam’s rinsing off their plates and looks over his shoulder to see—what?

"Lucas?" Dean says, standing up, and Lucas races straight across the kitchen and grabs Dean’s hands, tries to drag him with all the weight of his little body, his face screwed up and terrified. No sound, but there are tears streaked down his face and Dean throws a glance at Sam and then lets Lucas lead him.

Sam frowns, turns back to shut off the water, and it’s black. It’s black. He blinks, and drops the plate into the sink. Dean’s still walking at a normal pace, talking quietly to Lucas, when Sam races past them both. "Dean, the water," Sam says, and takes the stairs two at a time. Lucas thumps up after him, Dean on his tail, and now that they’re upstairs Sam can hear the splashing, smacks of water muffled behind the door. Lucas worms between Sam and the door, rattles the handle with a deep panicked grunt, and Sam picks him up bodily, hands him over to Dean to get him out of the way and then takes a step back and kicks with all his weight through the door and thank god, thank god the ghost isn’t strong enough to seal the whole house because the door slams open, cracking into the wall, and Sam rushes forward to the dark brimming void of the bathtub and plunges his arms in and finds still-warm flesh, and pulls—

Andrea falls asleep, finally, curled around Lucas in his bed. They debated calling the sheriff, but to say what? Dean makes coffee, downstairs, and Sam keeps watch from the doorway. Andrea’s hair is still wet, bound back and gleaming in the light from the hall; he can’t even see Lucas, tucked close against his mother’s body with her back to the door.

She didn’t want to hear what was happening, couldn’t hear anything, and Sam can’t blame her. Lucas didn’t stop crying, held tight in Dean’s arms while Sam helped her into a robe, and he didn’t stop crying when she came and took him and breathed shakily into his hair, and he didn’t stop crying when she put him to bed, and there was no space for Sam and Dean to ask their questions, then. Sam doesn’t know how he’ll handle it when she wakes up, either.

"Hey," Dean calls, from the bottom of the stairs. He’s holding two mugs of coffee and his face is grim. Sam takes a deep breath and pulls the door halfway shut on the two of them, and goes down the stairs, and waits.

It’s three in the morning and Sam’s dozing, his head tilted back against the couch, when Dean’s hand closes over his shoulder. He jerks upright and— "Andrea," he says.

Her hair’s dry, now. She’s wrapped up warm, sweatpants and a cardigan and shoes, even, like she’s going to take on a day that hasn’t started. "He’s still asleep," she says, and her voice isn’t exactly firm and she’s not smiling but she’s upright, she’s here. Dean gets up and pours her a cup of coffee, probably bitter now from sitting so long on the burner, but it’s warm. She takes the mug, wraps both hands around it, and then sits down very abruptly on the armchair across from the couch. "This is crazy," she says, but she looks right up at Dean, and then at Sam, and Sam nods. She’s ready to hear it.

Bill Carlton, and Peter Sweeney, and Jake Devins. Explorer Troop 37. Long summer days, a boyhood long disappeared into the safe, murky photo albums of the past. Mrs. Sweeney’s albums stopped thirty-five years ago, like a guillotine had sliced right through time; the photos here keep
going, the boys all getting taller and more tanned and becoming men right in front of the camera. All but one.

This hour of morning never feels quite real, no matter how many times Sam’s seen it from either end. Weird things happen. A woman on the verge of crying, bruises rising on her pale white throat from small, desperate hands—and it feels almost natural when Dean covers her hand carefully with his own, swallowing hard, and then when Sam catches the shadow of movement, a glimpse of white in the big pane of glass, and turns around to find Lucas blank-faced, opening the door to go out into the night, alone. They follow, because of course they do, and Sam and Dean dig into the space Lucas finds because of course they do, this is their work, and it’s no surprise at all, really, that after an hour with the house’s borrowed shovels there’s a metallic clang, and Sam ducks down and brushes away dirt to find—red. A bike. It wasn’t even buried that far down.

*C*ome play with me. That’s what Andrea heard, with her head under the water and her ears filled with ringing black. Bill and Peter and Jake, and what happened, all those years ago?

"What the hell are you doing?"

The sheriff. Like this, standing over them with his hand on his gun, his big coat hiding his badge, he’s just—a man. Jake, narrow-eyed but panic all over his face, and Sam says, "What did you do?"

He glares down at them, at the bike, and he says, "How did you—what the hell, how did you know that was there?" Angry, like he has any kind of right to be angry, and Sam comes out of the hole—the grave—with his fists clenched, and it’s only Dean grabbing him by the back of the shirt that stops him taking a swing, and Sam says, "What happened to Peter, Jake?" and Jake pulls his gun, just like that, points it square at Sam’s chest with his eyes wide and the barrel of the gun glinting metallic black in the porch-light.

"Put the gun down," Dean says, voice level, not letting go of Sam’s shirt, but Sam keeps his eyes right on Jake’s and talks over the top of him, says: "You know what happened. What, did you help? Did you do it? Peter Sweeney was his name. 1970. Mrs. Sweeney hasn’t changed his room in thirty-five years and Peter’s pissed, Jake, Peter wants blood."

"That’s—you’re insane," Jake says. He braces his other hand below the butt of the gun, steadying it even if his voice shakes. "You’re certifiable. How could you know that?"

"Dad?" Andrea says.

Jake whirls, dropping the barrel to point at the ground, and Andrea’s standing there backlit by the porchlight, the wind picking up the loose strands of her hair, her face a horror. Dean grabs Sam’s arm and hauls him a step back, but Sam’s watching Andrea. He’ll tackle Jake if he has to. He sets his feet firmly in the cold dirt, his hand on Dean’s shoulder.

Excuses tumble out—"They’re insane," Jake says, again, but he’s pleading now and they can all hear it. "They don’t—this is all just crazy, there’s no way Peter could——"

"Peter?" Andrea says, her voice like a lash.

*C*ome play with me. Sam can’t get that out of his head. "Bill died," Sam says. "And both his kids."

"And Chris," Dean says, beside him. "And then Peter came for Andrea, too, and then he’ll come for Lucas, and then he’ll kill you last."

"You don’t know what you’re talking about," Jake says, half-lifting his gun again. The wind’s getting stronger, the air icy in the pre-dawn dark. "Nothing’s going to happen."
"Yes, it will," Dean says. "Because of what you did to his mother."

Jake blinks at him and Andrea says, "Dad," softly, the no lanced straight through her voice, and Jake looks up at her and just like that the confession spills out, too late. Little Peter always hanging around, and Billy and Jake tired of him tagging along, and roughhousing and pushing and then finally holding his head under the water, yelling, and then Peter going still. Too late. Jake stares at the ground and Sam stares at Andrea, watches her world turn over, and that means he’s looking at her face when she turns away, clutching her belly like she’s been hit, and then her eyes flare wide.

"Lucas!" she screams, and Sam and Dean turn around to see—oh, fuck, the little white glimpse of him, trotting away through the dark trees.

Sam’s heart leaps to his throat and he runs. Down the slope, vaulting the fence, crashing through the trees and the sting against his throat, ducking under branches, and then the shore through the treeline, a wide gravel beach under the barely-bright moon and Lucas tiny at the end of the dock, and now Sam can hear it, whispering against and inside his skin, come play with me, sharp and needy and so terribly small, so young, and just like that Lucas topples forward, out of sight.

"No!" Dean shouts, and Sam’s already shedding his coat, pounding down the dock with Dean right behind him, and he can hear Andrea screaming something but there’s no time, no time—he hits the edge of the dock and dives in, clean, plunging straight down into—oh, fuck, freezing oppressive dark. The icy water hits him in the chest like a weight and he has to bite his lips between his teeth to stop from losing all his breath. He strains his eyes open, wide, but he can’t see a thing—no sunlight down here, no moonlight, just an unending blackness. He’s taking the widest strokes with his arms he can, pawing blindly through the water for just a glancing touch, any kind of contact he can get, because—they can’t fail, they can’t, not now, not when they were so close—not with Andrea’s cracked-open terror still ringing in his ears—but—his lungs are spasming, in his chest, his ears ringing, and he doesn’t know how deep he’s gone but he still hasn’t touched bottom and—fuck, he has to swim up, he has to, and he grits his teeth and kicks furiously with his whole body weighing him down, up and up until his ears pop and he breaks the surface, gasping, the air so cold his face hurts just from the touch of it—and Andrea’s collapsed down to her knees on the shore, mouth open, and—Dean, Sam spins around in the water, treading pointlessly, where’s Dean—until there’s another huge splash and Sam spins again and there’s his brother, thank god, and held close to his chest—Lucas, sodden and freezing and coughing up black water getting thinner and clearer by the second, thank god thank god thank god—

Sam makes it to ground first, but Dean’s not all that far behind, Lucas clinging to his neck. Sam holds out a hand and Dean grabs it, lets Sam haul them in closer, and when his feet are solid on the lake bottom he wraps both arms around Lucas, patting his back while he wades in to shore. On the shore Andrea watches with tears all over her face and she doesn’t get up, just holds out her hands and takes Lucas from Dean when they get close enough. "Baby," she whispers, her voice destroyed — "Baby, thank god, are you okay?"

"Yeah," comes a little voice, and Dean sags down to one knee on the rocks, his head dropping. Lucas’s arms go around Andrea’s neck and he buries his face in her throat, so his words are muffled. Muffled, but there. "Yeah, Mom, I’m okay." Andrea squeezes her eyes closed, puts her hand over the back of his soaked hair, and just cries harder.

Sam drops down next to Dean, freezing and exhausted. "It’s over," he says. He can’t believe it, not really. "Do you think Peter gave in?"

Dean shakes his head and tips over, lands on his ass so he’s sitting shoulder to shoulder with Sam. God, it’s cold. "I don’t know," Dean says, a little quieter. He runs a hand over his head, pushing his
hair off his forehead, and turns to look along the beach. "What happened to the sheriff?"

"What?" Sam says, and then sits up taller. Dean’s right; Jake’s gone. The shore’s empty but for the four of them. When he looks over, Andrea’s eyes are open again and she’s looking out at the dark lake. She’s still holding Lucas close, her arms banded around his back so tightly that he bets it hurts.

Lucas turns his head, though, putting his chin on her shoulder. His eyes glance over Sam and Dean, and then over the shore, and back into the woods, before he frowns. "Mom?" he says, tugging on the back of her sweater. "Mom, what happened to Grandpa?"

Andrea blinks, seems to come back to herself a little. She pulls back a few inches to get a look at Lucas’s face, petting the wet hair away and behind his ears. "He—had to go away," she says, and sniffs. Her eyes go all over his little face and she smiles, just the smallest bit, before she again looks out at the lake. "He had to make sure you were safe."

Sam closes his eyes. Of course. Dean leans hard against his arm and Sam takes a long, deep breath, filling his lungs with cold sharp morning air. Consequences, reaching down through the years, and a reparation made far too late. The things people will do, to keep a secret—but, then again, the things people will do to save their family. He sighs, and opens his eyes to see Lucas’s head laid again on his mother’s shoulder, but he’s watching Sam and Dean, his face open and alert, bright. Sam elbows Dean and nods Lucas’s way.

"Hi," Lucas says. He smiles at them, just a little shy.

"Hi," Dean says, and smiles back.

* *

Back at the motel, they strip out of their soaked-wet clothes and each take a long shower. When it’s his turn, Sam cranks the water up as hot as it will go, steaming the cold from his bones. He stands under the spray and leans his forehead against the tile, just breathing for a little while. When he finally leaves the bathroom, Dean has his bag packed and he’s sitting with the journal, reading at the empty table.

"Carl gave me a laundry bag," he says, eyes on the journal. "Throw your wet stuff in there and we can take care of it later."

The bag’s sitting open next to Sam’s duffel. He does as he’s told, and then sinks down to sit on the end of his bed, watching Dean.

"Seems like Lucas is going to be okay," he says, after a few seconds. "You sure you don’t want to run any tests?"

Dean shakes his head. "Whatever natural ability he might have, the source of all the power was Peter’s spirit." He slips a scrap of paper into the journal and closes it, his hands moving slow and careful. "He might pick up echoes when he’s older, but he’ll probably just think he’s really good at guessing stuff."

Sam smiles, thinking about it. It’ll make a good party trick, when Lucas goes to college. Dean’s still looking at his hands, wrapping the leather cord around the journal one slow loop at a time. Sam laces his fingers together between his knees, takes a deep breath.

"So," he says. Dean glances up. "Andrea and Lucas are going to be okay. Because of us."

Dean folds his arms, leans back in the creaky chair. "Because the sheriff sacrificed himself."
"Because we were here," Sam says, leaning forward. "Because we figured out what was going on, and because we were there for Lucas and Andrea, and because we told Jake it was Peter. If we hadn’t shown up, Peter would have taken all of them."

Dean drops his eyes to the journal, sitting neat and folded-away in the center of the table. He nods, after a second, and Sam blows out a long breath, drops his head. People died—people always die—but in the end, after everything, they won. Neither of them are hurt and a mother will get to raise her son and Peter, the poor kid, is finally at peace. Not a bad day’s work, in the end.

"I can’t wait to get back to the bunker," Dean says. Sam jerks his head up to find Dean standing, the journal tucked neatly under his arm. He thought they’d finished with this. Dean shakes his head. "I need to completely repack. Two suits isn’t enough, the way you keep dragging me into lakes."

Sam breathes out, relief blooming up in his chest. "If you’d just buy some new clothes you wouldn’t have to keep getting your stuff dry-cleaned," he says.

Dean rolls his eyes. "You’re obsessed with denim," he says. He’s brushed all the mud off of his second suit, but there are definite dark spots on the legs. Sam looks deliberately at the stains and then up at Dean, who shakes his head. "I’ve got clothes at home, it’ll be fine. Come on, I looked on the atlas, we’ve got six hundred miles to cover. Time to get going, Sammy."

They get the car packed up and Sam takes the room keys back to Carl. "Hope you enjoyed your stay," Carl says, clearly looking to go back to his crossword.

Sam smiles at him. "We did, thanks."

Dean’s leaning against the trunk when Sam comes out, spinning the keys in his hand. "Ready," Sam says.

It’s sunny out, even if the air’s bitingly cold. Dean looks up at the clear sky, at the trees all around, at the low hills. "Why don’t you drive," he says, and tosses Sam the keys. Sam catches them against his chest, frowning. Dean taps the journal, still tucked under his arm. "I’ve got clothes at home, it’ll be fine. Come on, I looked on the atlas, we’ve got six hundred miles to cover. Time to get going, Sammy."

They get into the car and Sam turns the engine over, turns the heat up. It’ll be warm, soon. "If I tell you all about the hunts I went on, I have a condition," he says, serious.

Dean stares at him, over the seat. "What?"

"I don’t have to listen to _The Long Run_ for at least a month," Sam says. "Actually, we could just throw the tape out the window right now."

"What!" Dean puts his hand protectively over the glovebox. "The Eagles are fantastic, Sam, don’t blaspheme."

"The Eagles are _awful_, Dean," Sam says, and puts the car in gear, turning to look over his shoulder to back up and hide his grin. Six hundred miles to the bunker. It’s a long time to bicker. Dean makes an outraged noise and Sam grins wider, covering his mouth with one hand while he waits to turn out of the parking lot. God help him, he’s looking forward to it.
Driving back into Kansas feels like driving back in time.

There’s a little snow on the ground, when they cross the state border. Not much, but enough that the dead grass is covered in a tiny bit of white frosting. Dean’s driving, with the Kinks playing on the tapedeck, and it’s been two slowish days of moving along the interstates on their way back—home. To the bunker.

Dead scrub on the sides of the road, the farms cut back with the growing season done. It’s a bright, clear day, cold with no wind, and Sam leans his elbow on the window with his hand over his mouth and watches the landscape go by. Dean hasn’t said much, the past fifty miles, and it’s just as well. Sam doesn’t know what he’d say back. Too many memories are dredging up, unearthing stuff he’d rather have forgotten.

Little town after little town. Farming operations, a dairy. They hardly see another car, even fewer than there were up in Manitoc, and despite all the wide land and the infinite blue dome of sky Sam feels almost claustrophobic.

Dean drives past the turn-off for Lebanon proper. A few miles more, that old solitary tree bare-
branched and grey against the sky, and they make the turn onto their dirt road. Sam closes his eyes rather than stare out at the empty fields.

"How long do you think we’ll need to stay?" Sam says.

Dean doesn’t respond right away. The Impala jolts gently along the bare dirt. "A few days," he says, finally. "I need to set up some warding, prep the bunker for being empty. We don’t know where we’re going next, yet, anyway."

The tape runs out, the last notes of Celluloid Heroes trailing away, and when it starts to whir Dean ejects it and doesn’t put a new one in. There’s just the sound of the engine, the tires on the dirt.

When the car turns again, Sam finally opens his eyes. The thick verge of trees that marks the edge of the bunker grounds are bare, too, but tall and almost stately. Dean has to hit the brakes when they reach the warded fence, the closed gate. "Hang on," he says, but Sam interrupts.

"I'll do it," he says, already opening his door. Chilly outside. He crunches along the gravel and wraps his hand around the cold steel. Huh. He was half-expecting—he doesn’t know, a spark or a jolt or something. Apparently he’s still folded under the protection of the bunker’s spells, or at least enough that he can see the fence, the gate, can lift it out of its simple weighted closure and walk it open for Dean to pull the Impala through.

Dean pulls the car forward and Sam swings the gate closed, but he knocks on the passenger window and gestures to Dean to go ahead instead of getting back in. He gets a considering look, but then Dean only nods and gently moves the car along the driveway, the engine rumbling loudly in the empty farm-field quiet. Sam opens his mouth and blows out a steady fogged breath, looking up at the big façade of the empty plant. It's amazing, really, that no one has ever come knocking, that none of the people in town have ever said: hey, what's with that massive industrial thing plopped right between Reeder's and Callahan's fields? Magic always has served the Letters well. He rubs his hand over his jaw. The Impala's already quiet, down at the end of the drive, and Sam closes his eyes for a second, breathes deep. Starts walking.

The grounds look—the same. Mostly the same. Trees, empty land, bare dirt where there's not dead grass. The plant's sides are still half-buried and it looks like a new bush is trying to grow up above the entrance. He's surprised Dean's letting it. Then again, gardening wasn't ever really one of Dean's strong suits. His either, if it came to that. He buries his hands in his pockets. It's so weird, coming up this path. So many times he snuck back after hanging out with Travis or Scott or Pete, playing a pickup game of baseball or splashing through the cow pond or sneaking beers sitting on the huge wheels of someone's dad's tractor, hoping not to be caught. There wasn't really anyone to catch Sam, not really. Dad was gone, half the time, and Dean—well, after a while he got used to Sam heading out for the day. He didn't even ask questions, after a while. All he needed was for Sam to come home.

The Impala's parked neatly in the space right in front of the entrance, as always. Dean will probably back it down the garage ramp, before nightfall. Even if literally no one can get onto the grounds to steal it, he always was careful with the car. Sam lays a hand on the trunk, leans heavily against it for a second. Trails his hand over the flank, fingers bumping the door handles until he gets to the hood, and then he runs out of hood, and there are just the steps, and the door, and he doesn't really think of himself as a coward, but if the shoe fits—

The door creaks when he opens and closes it, always has. There's the little space of mudroom, the crackle of the warding magic so oppressive for a second that he has to catch his breath—or maybe that's just looking out over the balcony. He steps forward, braces against the railing. The map room is lit up, the library glowing through the archway in warm amber. Dean's leaning over his bag on the
workstation in the corner, his coat slung over one of the chairs, and Sam watches him store his key in the drawer, watches him buzz over to the communication console to check the radio, the warding sensors, hands flying familiarly over all the little maintenance tasks that always got on Sam's nerves. There was never a breach, after all, so why bother with checking? *That's like saying you never drown, so why learn CPR*, their dad had said, in a rare moment where he bothered to explain himself. He'd sent Sam to run laps around the bunker perimeter anyway.

"Everything good?" Sam says, for something to say.

Dean looks up at him, surprised somehow for a second. "So far," he says, almost guarded. His mouth twists, and then he turns back to the console, back to work. "You going to come down? The stairs aren't booby-trapped, promise."

Easy for him to say. Sam chews the inside of his lip. He comes down.

The chalkboards with their lists of tasks and chores are the same; the desks are the same. Dean's old computer still sits in its place of pride, no matter that it looks like a behemoth to Sam. Over at the console, Dean presses a few buttons in a sequence Sam can't quite see, and Sam's eardrums pop at a change in pressure as the ventilation changes. Dean really did close down before he left.

"I need to check, make sure no one's sent any requests in," Dean says, pressing the huge power button on the computer. "Vancouver kind of had a tricky problem. Not sure Granger knew what he was doing."

Sam stands in the middle of the room, feeling awkward. He doesn't want to touch anything. "Granger?"

Dean glances at him. "Second of the Vancouver chapterhouse," he says. "Named while you were gone." He sits down in the rolling chair in front of the computer, waiting for it to whir ponderously to life. "Some things do change around here, you know."

Not something he wants to come even remotely close to. He braces a hand on one of the pillars, taking a deep breath. "How long, do you think?" he says.

Some of the strain must have come through in his voice because Dean really looks at him, that time, swiveling the chair to face him and frown. "A day or two, I told you," he says, after a pause. "I'm on board here, Sam."

"I know," Sam says, and drags his hands through his hair. "I know, I—sorry."

Dean looks at him for another few seconds. "Why don't you go lay down for a little while? You look like something the cat dragged in."

"Wow, that's kind of you," Sam says, and Dean smiles a little, at last. "You've never even had a cat."

"And yet here you are," Dean says, and then: "Go on, I've got some research to do," and so Sam doesn't really have a choice then but to turn around and face the two steps down out of the map room to the halls, and then—well, this is it. He really is home.

He used to have dreams about these hallways. Nightmares, maybe, though they weren't frightening so much as—his whole body would curl up around unease, his mouth tasting odd and his throat tight when he'd wake up out of them. Long greyish halls, stone and concrete, going on and on, and in the dreams they'd go on forever and he could never find his way out, although he kept finding new rooms full of stranger and stranger things. He didn't need to be an oracle to interpret that. He walks along, hands shoved into his hoodie pockets, and passes—yes, there's the workroom where he and
Dean would work on alchemical combinations when he was little, and there's the computer room that runs the warding, and there's the storage room where Sam hid once, sulky and crying, for almost six hours until Dean finally burst in and dragged him out into the light, furious.

Their dad's door is shut, no light coming from under the door. He gets a weird jolt, walking past it, but Dean's right—he's tired. Too tired for that, right now. He turns the corner of the hall to the second stretch of bedrooms, and there's Dean's room with the door slightly cracked, and then his. Number sixteen. In numerology sixteen stands for family, wisdom, and independence. He'd thought that was sort of funny, when he was growing up. Maybe not funny ha-ha.

With the light flicked on, it's—the same. It doesn't even have that musty smell of a long-unlived space, with Dean coming in periodically to clean it. The bed's neatly made, single pillow right in the center of the headboard. The blue comforter he got for some birthday folded down at the foot. Such a lame present, he'd thought at the time, though he hadn't dared say anything to Dad, and he sits down on the bed with his head in his hands and breathes, slow, in and out, over and over. All this history, rushing up, when he thought he was done with it. If he manages to sleep here, it's going to be with so many weird dreams that it won't even count as rest.

There's the thinnest layer of dust on his bedside table. The drawer still holds the copy of *The Lord of the Rings* he sort of stole from the library in town, and a couple of Spiderman comics Dean gave him. He kicks his sneakers off and lays down, rolls into the center of the bed, and—it's shorter than he remembers. Maybe he grew. He curls up on his side, instead, and doesn't turn off the lamp, and watches the wall, the silence a thick blanket laying heavy over the whole bunker. If he concentrates he can hear the air filters running. He tries to let his brain go quiet, tries to relax. The mattress is hard. It's cold.

When he comes back out of the halls, Dean's relocated from his computer to the library, spread out on one of the tables with about a dozen books open around him, leaning over some old grimoire Sam doesn't recognize. He doesn't look surprised to see Sam this time, at least, though he checks his watch. "You get any sleep?" he says, eyebrows drawn down.

An hour drifting uncomfortably down there was more than enough. "I'm good," Sam says, nodding. He can't tell if Dean believes him. "How's it coming out here?"

Dean shrugs, looking at him steadily for another long moment before he returns his attention to the books. "Vancouver needs as much as I can give them on Kuroshian selkie magic," he says, matter-of-fact. "Granger hasn't been keeping up their collection. Dad was right, MacDonald hasn't been supervising his house properly." He shakes his head, automatic disapproval, but then he puts his finger on some passage and glances up at Sam. "I finish up this project and it'll be a breather, for a while. I only had two other requests on the computer. We should be able to close up and head out, keep looking for Dad. I just need a little time, Sam."

"Yeah," Sam says. He sits in one of the club chairs, dragging his hands through his hair. A wave of tiredness crashes over him again. These damn things always were comfortable, and the light in here—it doesn't feel cold. This is the best room in the bunker and always has been.

Silence, for a second, but it's not as oppressive with Dean turning pages, the scratch of a pen on paper. Sam really could sleep here, if he got the chance.

"Hey, since you're not doing anything," Dean says, and Sam jolts upright, the world wobbling. How long was he sitting there? Dean's looking for a book on one of the shelves in the section on Native folklore on the other side of the room. "There's not really any food that's not in cans. You want to go into town, pick up something?"
No; Sam wants to get out of Kansas entirely. Getting out of the bunker will do in a pinch. "Anything specific?" he says, standing up, and Dean shakes his head, says, "Take thirty bucks from the drawer," and Sam grabs the keys from their assigned hook and opens up the junk drawer in the map room and takes thirty-five out of the neat rolls of separated bills just to be contrary, and then he's up and out and into the Impala and driving away in less than a minute, his body waking up just at moving, at being out in the bright open air again. Even with the nothing-landscape rolling out to the sides of the bunker, it feels a lot less claustrophobic now that he has something to compare it to.

It's a quick trip into Lebanon, always has been. When they used to walk it, before their dad passed the car down to Dean, it'd be a meandering hour. The cornfields look the same as they did then. Maybe a little smaller. He wonders if Travis's dad still owns the farmland to the north, as he drives past it.

Travis talked about becoming a cop, when they were kids. He was the only other one of the farm kids Sam met who wanted something more. They'd been friends, sort of, if pick-up baseball and getting into random fights and never really talking about anything more than whose sister was growing up cute counted as friends. He makes the turn onto the 281 and that farm fades into the next one, the fields fallow and waiting for spring. Almost four years, since he's thought about Travis. That probably goes both ways.

The town appears out of nothing, all of a sudden. Trees rise up, bare branches interrupting the huge empty sky and then, ah, the co-op gas station, with that red truck still parked out in front. Small houses, dead frosted grass, the road cutting straight through. He remembers the way—right and then left, past more little houses, the little building that passes for a city hall, the little library. It's closed. There are a couple of cars in front of the market, a truck delivering Coke, and he eases the Impala up into one of the angled spaces and cuts the engine, sits there in the cold for a few seconds.

When he and Jenn went and visited her parents, that first time, she kept staring out the car window at all these totally unremarkable things. The hardware store, the church, the park with its rickety swings. It's so small, she kept saying, almost confused. This is so weird. It's so small. Maybe, Sam had said, just to mess with her, it was only that she'd gotten bigger, and she'd socked him in the arm with her tiny fist and told him not to be smug, it wasn't attractive.

He forces himself to get out of the car when he realizes he's just been sitting there for five minutes. Inside, the market is…yes, the same. Mostly the same. Sharon's at the register, talking with a man Sam doesn't recognize immediately. She's a little older, but she's still wearing that haircut straight out of 1986, still dyed that unnatural shade of apricot. They both look at him immediately when the bell clangs over his head and her eyebrows go up and the man frowns, but Sam only points a mild tight smile their way and grabs one of the metal baskets and makes his way around the tiny aisles, looking for anything at all rather than risk a conversation he'd rather break an arm than have.

So many things the same. White bread and different white bread. Wrapped American singles; a block of bargain-value cheddar. A few more corporate brands have popped up but that’s just how time has moved on, everywhere. He stands in the snack aisle and considers bringing Dean a basket full of Hershey’s and popcorn. That’s dinner. It’s calories, it should count.

He and Jennifer used to go to this little grocery run by little Haitians grandmas, just outside their neighborhood. Dirt-cheap and the people were friendly in a suspicious sort of way. Sam made them nervous—too tall. They didn’t really cook, either of them, but it was fun to try things just for the hell of it. Plantains and black rice and Maggi djon djon bouillon that they turned into a semi-edible soup that Sam ended up eating for breakfast four days in a row. He didn’t even care, really, that it was sort of weird and gross. It was something different. That was all he wanted.
He gets a six-pack of the only semi-decent beer they have to top off his basket. He deserves it. At the register, the man’s gone—and who was he? How is it possible that something has changed in this town?—and Sharon is waiting, smiling but with a squint, like she’s trying to place him and she’s irritated she can’t. “Hi there, darling,” she says. “That all for you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sam says, and puts his cash on the counter.

“Not a lot of tourists in Lebanon,” she tries. “Not this time of year.” Sam hums, noncommittal. She’s using the handheld barcode scanner that had been a big deal for the store to put in, back in the early nineties. She used to show it off to every customer. Now I won’t get that arthritis in my old age, she’d say. In his teens Sam stopped coming to the store if he could avoid it, letting Dean take care of that chore on his own. That way at least he wouldn’t have to hear the same set of jokes every other week.

The bell dings again, behind him; he keeps his head down at the counter. Sharon smiles, says, “Hiya, Morton,” and yeah, that’s Mr. Reeder, still kicking, still running that stupid feed store cum dry-cleaner. The bunker’s been keeping him in business for the past fifty years, Sam’s pretty sure. Sharon’s smile slips and shrivels when she turns it back on Sam and she purses her lips, sliding his cash over to make change. “Well, I hope you like it here, young man,” she says, in a precise and fake-polite sort of way. “We’re a good town. Good, friendly folks.”

Tiniest edge to it. So Midwest. Sam misses Boston intensely for a second. At least there the judgment was in-your-face. “I can tell,” Sam says, taking his paper bag, and he’s out of there and back on the road as quick as he can. Mr. Reeder can chat with Sharon all he wants; he’s sure there’ll be a little flurry of gossip about some rude, tall stranger. Anonymity: another thing to miss about the city. When there are a million people teeming all around, no one stands out. Easy, that way, to be himself. More or less.

Back at the bunker, Dean’s deep in his books and he looks up with a surprised honest smile when Sam comes down the stairs with his bag, but he doesn’t say anything before he turns back to the research, and so Sam goes down through the map room to the kitchen and puts the paper bag on the island, and folds down with his forehead braced against his clenched fists for no more than thirty seconds. It’s—what, not even four o’clock yet. Okay. So, a little early for dinner. He can have a beer. That’s something to do.

Dean wanders in some hours later. Sam’s on beer number three, reading their dad’s journal. Another case, he’s pretty sure, although it’s so hard to pry into the man’s mind. This one dated way back in ’95. Visiting a colleague, he writes. That always seems to be how the hunts start. A colleague. M:F. Silverware tarnished. Two less two. Mr. H a help, and will help again.

“Werewolf,” Sam says, and looks up. Dean frowns at him. He took off his suit-jacket and his sleeves are rolled up, and there’s dust on his cheek. Positively casual. Sam shakes his head and looks back at the page. “‘Silverware,’ that’s got to be a werewolf, right?”

His head hurts. When he reaches for his beer it’s only got one more swallow—pity. “Think so,” Dean says, cautiously. “You doing okay?”

“Peachy,” Sam says. Maybe it sounds caustic but he doesn’t care. He hates it here. He puts the empty bottle down on the table with a precise empty thunk and when he looks up again Dean’s looking impassive. Figures. Conflict-free Dean, like a diamond. “How’s the research coming along?”

“Fine,” says Dean, and doesn’t elaborate. He goes over to the bag Sam left on the island, looking through. Stuff in there for grilled cheese, the cheap-brand soft pickles that Sam buys—bought—at home. Dean doesn’t say anything, just gets to work, and Sam sits there and stares down at the
journal, at the kitchen table, and doesn’t help, and wants to just—well, but there’s nothing to do, is there. That’s the whole problem. The silence hangs over his neck like a yoke.

Two less two. What does it mean? Sam rubs his forehead, repetitive strokes hard over the bone like that’ll help, somehow. Homework, that’s what this feels like. Sitting in the kitchen after a fight with Dad and Dean’s silent disapproval sitting heavy in his stomach, and waiting for dinner and waiting for Dean to soften, waiting for the frost to melt. He ran so far, so long, and here he is right where he started. He hates treadmills.

That makes him snort, for some reason. It’s not very funny. He glances up at Dean—Dean’s back, rather, standing quiet at the stove while the food cooks up, and Dean doesn’t flinch or turn or make any indication that he heard anything. Sam takes a deep breath. He’s an adult. This is ridiculous.

“Two less two,” he says. Dean’s head tips, enough that Sam can see his profile. “What do you think?”

“What’s the context?” Dean says, after a moment. He flips the sandwiches, doesn’t turn around.

Sam reads the short entry out loud. “Any of that sound familiar?”

“M:F means that the moon’s phase is full,” Dean says. Very matter-of-fact, but at least he’s talking. “Dad uses that in his notes a lot, it’s useful shorthand for spellwork. Makes sense if it’s a werewolf.”

Random memory—flipping through a sheaf of translations, M:WG, M:XC, M:QF. Of course. Sam pushes the empty bottle out of the way. Being down here is rotting his brain. “Yeah, okay. Two less two, though.”

“Plates,” Dean says, instead of answering, and Sam jumps up without thinking about it. Old habit, shoving at his hindbrain without his say-so. He picks out two plates from the shelves on the island and comes over, and Dean deftly slides two perfectly-grilled sandwiches onto each and then cuts the burner with his other hand. The smell’s making Sam’s mouth water, and his too-warm empty belly growls, on cue. Dean’s mouth quirks, though he takes his plate without cracking a joke about how Sam’s a bottomless pit. Some habits do die, maybe.

Sam rotates the journal so Dean can read while he eats. The sandwiches are commercial-perfect melty, thin slices of pickle embedded in the cheese with a smear of mustard—something Dean used to make when Sam was a kid. Sam’s disappear a lot faster than Dean’s, but they’re both quiet, Dean frowning at the journal and flipping back and forth through some of the pages they’ve marked in their reading. “One less three,” Dean mumbles, reading aloud, and then finds five less one, three less none. The last has Dean tapping the page with his forefinger and he pulls out the weird bookmark their dad left on that page. Folded-up newsprint, an article: three dead in Baton Rouge, killer not found. The notes marked down for that week in 2000 are even more terse, with no follow-up. “Maybe,” Dean says, slow. “Maybe it’s… bodies? Three dead. Three less…”

Food gone, Sam wipes his greasy fingers on his jeans and spins the journal back his way. “He didn’t solve this one, I don’t think.” There in the frustrated sloppiness of the handwriting. No notes, not really, but Sam’s feeling his way around the idea. ‘Less none. So—three died, but he didn’t catch what did it. But maybe, that werewolf case, two people died and then… then he killed two werewolves? With the help of—of Mr. H, whoever that is.”

June 2000. Sam remembers that summer, the year before he left. When he came by Dad was angry, irritable. Wasn’t exactly news, but Sam was getting real tired of it. They fought a lot, then. He flips a page forward, past the saved article. If he’s right, it’s a relic of a failure. Not like their dad, he would’ve thought, but then this journal is proof enough that the man held his secrets closer than
anything. Certainly closer than the two of them. D progressing, Sam reads. We can proceed soon. No more wasted time. S on g.r. training, 2x. No real code needed there. Dean was always the one who was progressing; Sam only got more training piled on. At least the gun range was better than Latin drills.

“He was hunting a lot more than I thought,” Dean says. Very quiet, and when Sam looks up Dean’s eyes are half-lidded, focused on the journal. He’s finished eating and he’s rubbing his thumb in slow circles over and over the sun tattoo on his wrist. “If we’re reading that right.”

Sam chews the inside of his lip. They’d gone through some of the more obvious cases—some weren’t written up like code at all, when he was consulting with another chapterhouse, or when he was assigning a hunter in the area to take care of the job. Now, Sam wonders if all of that was just cover, or if Dad had gone in alongside the hunter and fought the damn things himself. Vampires, werewolves, ghouls. All sorts of ugly, all over the pages of this thing. The injustice wells up in his chest again, but he tries to fight it down. “We’re all hunting, now,” Sam says. “About time.”

Dean’s eyes flick up at him, then away. “Lucky us,” he says, standing, and he takes Sam’s plate and stacks them up next to the sink. “I have more work to do, at least another couple of hours. We should be able to head out in the morning.”

Stiff. All this history’s worse than a minefield. Sam says, “Do you want help?”

“You want to take notes on avian migration in the Pacific Northwest as it relates to leyline shifts?” Dean says, dry, and turns around in time to catch Sam’s grimace. He gets a pale smile, for that. “Thought so. I’ve got it, Sammy.”

Gone again. Sam watches the empty doorway for a minute. He wants another beer. Instead, he takes a breath, and stands up, and goes to take care of the dishes and scrub the griddle clean. Whoever doesn’t cook takes care of the dishes, that was always the rule. Meant Sam’s washed a hell of a lot of dishes in his day. He didn’t mind, really. It’s the kind of chore that lets the mind go blank. It’s good for him.

He sleeps uneasy, that night, tucked into his old room. Wakes up half a dozen times, mind full of dreams he doesn’t remember and dreams he unfortunately does. Fire, licking up the walls, before he shoves his eyes open and finds that old half-darkness. The hall-lights are always on, filtering through the grates in the door.

He doesn’t know when or if Dean went to bed, but he’s up and showered and dressed in a new clean suit when Sam comes out in the morning, sour-tempered and headachy. “Rise and shine,” Dean says, glancing away from the computer. “How do you feel about St. Louis?”

Sam collapses into one of the rolling chairs at the map table. “It’s, uh, ugly,” he says, scrubbing his hair with both hands.

Dean snorts. “Good to know,” he says, and then, “I’ve got a request for a book delivery from their Second. I’m thinking, we can go over there and you can play courier again, and we can ask about Dad.”

St. Louis. Sam yawns, jaw-cracking, and tries to remember anything about the city beyond the ridiculous arch from when he passed through a few years ago. “You think he went there? Why?”

“I don’t know, Sam,” Dean says, rolling back from the computer. He shrugs, and Sam manages to see past his bleariness to notice the frustration in his tight mouth, the thumb tapping at his thigh. “We need to look, right? It’s a place to start. It’s not that far away. This is the perfect pretext, we might as
well take advantage of it.”

The shadows under his eyes haven’t lifted, even if he’s clean-shaven and neatened up, pressed and perfect as though a senior Warder were visiting. Sam shakes his head, tries to get his head in gear. “Yeah, okay,” he says, scraping his hair back from his face. “St. Louis. Let’s do it.”

Dean nods, and stands up, and then wrinkles his nose. “You need to shower first,” he says, looking Sam up and down in his ratty jeans and the sleep shirt he dug out of his old dresser. “Badly. And a comb wouldn’t, you know, hurt anything.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam says, unfolding out of the chair. St. Louis. Okay. Dean’s on board, and they’ve got a direction to go. The day’s off to a better start than he expected.

By unspoken agreement they take route 36 to the north of Kansas City, bypassing Lawrence entirely, following the line of bare distant trees along sparsely-driven blacktop through a clear day. They take turns driving, and napping; when Sam takes the wheel Dean crawls directly into the backseat and is asleep before they leave the gas station. Sam keeps the radio on low and only drives eight miles over the speed limit, and his headache’s gone by the time the outskirts of St. Louis hove into view, most of a day later.

Almost seven at night, the night’s pitch black above, the city lit up and traffic moving decently around the car. The old chapterhouse was in a run-down neighborhood of two-stories; the organization stripped the house and moved into a building on the university campus in the late 1970s. Sam doesn’t remember the Warder’s name. Dean will, of course.

He’s sleeping, still, while Sam drives slowly through surface streets. There was only one reason he’d come here, really, and as they get closer to campus he starts to remember the way. “Dean,” he says, and then again, louder, and there’s a snort from the backseat, a shuffle. In the rearview Dean sits straight up, wiping his face fast and shaking his head. “You want me to try to get into the house tonight?” Sam says. Dean’s still blinking and Sam grins at his reflection, turning to follow the river south. “Or get a motel and wait ’til morning?”

“Morning,” Dean says, voice barely there, and clears his throat like a drain unclogging. Ew. “Zimmerman keeps office hours.” Sam nods. Just as well, he’d have to clean up and change to get in, either way. There’s a dry skin-on-skin sound and when he checks the rearview Dean’s looking around, twisting back and forth to peek through the windows. Nothing special, just the usual downtown cluster of squat office buildings, random lights on random stories with workers staying late. “Where are we?”

“Near SLU,” Sam says. “Figured we’d swing out a little way, find a motel that won’t cost the earth. Wanted to see something first, though.”

“We’re not sightseeing, Sam,” Dean says, prim, and Sam rolls his eyes. This is why he wanted to be the one driving. He changes lanes out from behind a moving truck and merges up onto the freeway, and yeah, there, huge and looming up through the windshield. Dean leans forward, over the bench seat. “What the hell?”

“Oh, we’re not sightseeing?” Sam says, but he’s not too snide about it. The Gateway Arch at night, it’s worth it. It’s not like seeing it on TV.

There’s quiet, from Dean, as it gets bigger and bigger in front of them. The lights arc up the curve of it in electric blue, carving a massive sci-fi swoop through the night sky. “Wow,” Dean says, half a
breath, and Sam merges to take the curve of highway over the bridge, across the river. They can stay on that side, tonight; there’s sure to be some dirty motel that won’t charge too much. This is St. Louis. Dean keeps turning to follow the Arch as they move around it, and turns around completely to watch it recede behind them. Central Kansas, eat your heart out, thinks Sam. The town might be a pit, but at least it’s not Lebanon.

“Better than the monument for the center of the contiguous states, you think?” Sam says.

He gets a little shove to his shoulder and when he glances up Dean’s sitting back on the bench, his face half-lit by the bridge lights. “Think it might be a little ostentatious for Lebanon,” he says, dry. He cranes his neck around again to check it out, though, and Sam grins and pulls off to find somewhere they can rest their heads. He’s starving, too. Maybe he can introduce Dean to decent ribs. It’ll be a good buffer to remember before having to deceive yet another Warder of the Men of Letters, in the morning.

Sam’s up first, and once he hauls on jeans and sneakers and shoves himself into his coat he finds the day outside bitingly, bitterly cold. Freezing wind coming off the river, maybe. Not snowing, not yet, and he huddles into himself as he stumps along the cracked sidewalk to the tiny motel office, where as promised there’s coffee and watery orange juice and bruised bananas waiting. The fat clerk from last night is gone, replaced by a twenty-something girl doing her mascara in a hand mirror. She blinks at Sam, drags her eyes down his body, but he only gives her a bland smile and turns to the coffee, draining a cup straight into his gut before he refills it, and pours another to take back for Dean. He should have bought a couple of minis when they last stopped for gas. Heading into a chapterhouse completely sober just sounds really terrible, from this morning’s perspective.

When he manages to get the door open to the room, Dean’s sitting up in bed, rubbing his squinted-shut eyes. A wordless grab at air with his eyes closed and Sam puts the black cup in his outstretched hand, shoving the door closed with his heel. “You feeling up for a chase?” Sam says, more awake now.

Dean grunts, face buried in the coffee cup. Yeah, that’s about how Sam feels, too. Even so, just like Dean said—it’s a direction. “Okay,” says Sam, and Dean slits an eye at him above the paper rim of the cup. “We’re wasting the day, let’s go.”

Shower for Sam, and then Dean crawls out of bed and slumps into the bathroom while Sam unzips his bag and finds the suit Dean packed for him. Not his own, the one he’d gotten when he turned sixteen and their dad (or Dean, he was never sure) decided he ought to be presentable if need be, because that one stopped fitting about six inches ago and highwaters aren’t the look the Men of Letters typically go for. This chocolate-brown slick piece of suffocating armor is his dad’s. He doesn’t know how Dean knew it’d work, but he disappeared into their dad’s room and emerged with it in its neat dry-cleaning bag and didn’t even have Sam try it on—but here he is, and the inseam’s almost right, the waist a little loose but nothing that can’t be solved with a belt, and the jacket’s just barely too tight across the shoulders but it’ll work, and Sam stares at himself in the pitted mirror above the desk and tries not to claw it right off his back. It’s like looking into a grotesque funhouse mirror, into some other world where things went exactly how they should have and he was exactly who he was meant to be.

“Jacket’s a little short,” says Dean, behind him. Bathroom door’s open, a new flood of foggy heat pouring into the room. Sam turns around, doesn’t want to look anymore, and finds Dean giving him a steady appraisal. He’s in slacks and a clean white shirt, buttoned at collar and cuffs. They’ll make quite the pair. His eyes flick up and down Sam and then he nods, turns away, and says, “You’re not
getting out of wearing a tie, either.”

Of course not. Sam checks his watch. Not quite seven o’clock. That’ll be time to grab food, check out some local news. Zimmerman keeps office hours, Dean says, and Sam will be the first appointment of the day.

Dean pulls up to the curb in front of the university’s museum, idling under the bare trees. Not much time to linger, with morning traffic churning along the boulevard. Sam squints at the columns, looming up through the thin fog.

“You good, you know where to go?” Dean says, and Sam gives him a look, already opening the passenger door. Cold air floods in and Dean shivers, shoves at his shoulder. “Okay. Call me, as soon as you’re done.”

“I know,” Sam says, and slams the door closed and waves Dean along. Like a kid getting dropped off by an overbearing mom. The SUV forced to slow down behind the Impala honks, even though Dean’s already easing away. Typical.

He folds his coat tighter around his waist, blowing out a purl of white. The museum’s an imposing building, a fake-classic like a lot of things are around here. Closed, on a Tuesday, but that doesn’t matter. Sam follows the directions drilled into him over breakfast: down below the sweeping staircase, just to the right, a door, and on the door a buzzer, and he presses it in a familiar sequence: one-two, one, one-two-three. He shoves his free hand into his coat pocket, rolls his shoulders back. Time to go.

When the door opens he smiles, polite. The porter’s dressed as a regular security guard, though the usual cheap windbreaker’s replaced with something in wool. “Museum’s closed,” the man says, neutral.

“Delivery,” Sam returns, calm as can be. “For Mr. Kelley, from Mr. Dee.”

As before, he’s folded inside at once, the porter bowing his head as Sam passes. Strange entrance, this time—clearly public, the elevator for handicapped guests waiting to one side of the dim entry. Sam follows the porter to a separate door marked Staff Only, and the man puts his hand flat on the wood and murmurs something Sam can’t hear that makes a latch pop, somewhere. Through the door: a flight of stairs, thin worn carpet muffling their steps as they descend past the faux-marble sheathing to dark brick, down at least two stories before they come to another door, this one with an Aquarian star inset above the knob. “After you, sir,” the porter says, swinging it open with a nod, and Sam passes into—god, a vault.

Not like the bunker, nor like the chapterhouse in Portsmouth. This is stone and brick, all around, steel bookcases arrayed along the wall like a library. A young man peeks his head around from one of the alcoves when they come in. “Ben, who’s this?” he says. Voice surprisingly high, light, his hair sticking up like he’s been running his hands through it. “Who are you?”

Not said like a challenge, just bemused—Sam smiles, waving the paper-wrapped bundle in his hand. “Sam Winchester,” he says. The guy’s expression doesn’t change at all. Hm. “Making a delivery, as requested.” He turns to the porter, waiting impassively. “Could I see Warder Zimmerman? I understand that he’s expecting this.”

Another quick nod and the porter disappears through the archway at the far end of the room. Even more laconic than James. The room’s ceiling is cavernously high, enough that thin bars of light from
the grey day peek through slit windows that must be laid into the pavement at ground level. The rest of the room is lit by old-fashioned amber bulbs, suffusing everything in an antique light. In it the left-behind guy could be any age, eighteen to thirty, and he squints at Sam, drags his hand through his hair like he’s trying to put together a puzzle. “Winchester?” he says, and Sam nods and doesn’t offer anything more. “Huh. Patterson, Jacob. Jake, I guess. Are you with the organization?”

Jake, he guesses. Okay. “More or less,” Sam says, which is true. He didn’t notice any magic or warding when he passed inside, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t here. “I’m a legacy, but I haven’t gone through initiation yet. Just doing the family a favor.”

Jake stares, then shrugs. “Favors are good,” he says, and disappears back into the notch of the shelves so Sam can’t see him. “Gotta make sure you do them for the right people.”

Sam’s still frowning at the bookcase, trying to work that out, when Ben reappears and gestures for Sam to follow. A long hallway, doors lining either side with frosted glass and blinds, cool dry air that smells of white sage. Ben knocks at the third-to-last door from the end of the hall and opens it without waiting for a response, gesturing for Sam to go in—and he does, and the door closes behind him, and there’s a Warder, scribbling away at something, ready to be lied to.

Zimmerman’s tall, is Sam’s first impression—taller than he is, probably, and that’s saying something. No jacket on, but wearing a bright blue waistcoat, and a yarmulke to match. A huge desk occupies the center of the room, with the usual leather-and-mahogany trappings, gold fixtures and books everywhere, but Zimmerman isn’t using it. He’s standing at a lectern, under a huge map that takes up most of the wall, writing so fast Sam can’t believe it’d be legible. Sam holds the bundle of books in both hands, shifts his weight. On the opposite wall from the map, glass-cased shelves hold strange brass contraptions, books so old the leather’s barely holding together. In the center there’s a safe of some kind, solid old metal, with Werther etched in blocky capitals above it on the glass. If circumstances were different Sam might want to poke at some of this stuff, but he’s on a mission, here. He’s considering a passive-aggressive clearing of the throat when Zimmerman jabs the pen into the page and says ha under his breath, and then he turns on his heel and fixes Sam with a stare as intense as the writing he was doing and says, “Winchester!” as loud and deep as Jake wasn’t.

“Yes, sir,” Sam says, almost entertained. Who is this guy. “Sam. I’m assuming you know my father?”

“Absolutely,” Zimmerman says, walking over loom over the desk. “Good man to have a screaming argument with.”

Sam snorts, can’t help it. Zimmerman raises his eyebrows, giving Sam a look, but turns his attention to his desk, shoving piles in a search for who-knows-what. “Understand you’ve got a delivery for me,” he says, and Sam steps forward, places the package carefully on top of a pile of books that seems safe for now. Zimmerman nods and pulls out a silver—well, could be a letter opener, except that the edge is far too curved and looks sharp enough to kill. Sam steps back, prudently, while Zimmerman slices the cord Dean tied the books with and shears the paper wrapper open. Whatever’s in there gets a hum of approval, Zimmerman’s surprisingly dainty fingers tipping through the books to check the titles. “Good, good. Good stuff. Although,” he says, almost absent-minded, “I wonder why a Warder’s son is playing delivery boy.”

“My brother sent me,” Sam says, not having to work too hard to put a little irritation into it. Zimmerman grins down at the books. He doesn’t care to look up at Sam; just as well, considering that now’s the time to lay on the acting. Sam doesn’t feel like this guy will be as easily led along as Haight. He slips his hands into his pockets, tries to be casual. “I was supposed to be meeting up with our dad, but Dean wanted hand-delivery.”
“Conscientious, good man.” He cracks open one of the books and there’s a note inside. Dean’s handwriting, Sam can tell even upside-down. “And thorough. He’ll make a good Warder, if he ever sets his mind to it.”

Sam bites the inside of his cheek, hard, takes in a slow breath through his nose. “Yeah,” he says, after a pause that he hopes isn’t too long. Zimmerman’s eyes flick up, under those beetley eyebrows, flick back down. Sam goes for broke. “My dad mentioned he was going to swing through here, actually. I don’t suppose he stopped in?”

Zimmerman grunts. “John and his house-calls,” he says, shaking his head. He shoves Dean’s note between some middle pages as a marker and drops the book to the desktop, lifting his chin to look down that very long nose at Sam. He straightens up, automatically. “Looking for the old man, are we?”

Cold seizes Sam’s stomach. “Well,” he fumbles, “not—looking for, like I said, we were going to meet—”

“Son, you’re bad at this,” Zimmerman says, but he looks amused. Sam cuts himself off. “Your father isn’t exactly known for staying in one spot, you don’t need to cover for him. All those trips. If he flew he’d have enough miles to cross the globe a few times.”

Sam stays silent. Dean’s going to be—god, what are they going to do?

Zimmerman squints at him, then waves his hand. “Don’t look so constipated, kid, you look ridiculous.” He plops down to the throne-like chair, folding his hands over his belly. “Your brother’s quite capable of running things, we all know that. Maybe he isn’t an officially-named Second with all the rites that entails—hell, I don’t think he’s even gone through the examination to be a Practitioner, has he?—but he’s got the knowledge. He’s holding up the legacy well enough. John can go on his little adventures. God knows he’s earned them.”

“Yes, sir,” Sam says, and wants desperately to ask more questions. Zimmerman isn’t like any Man of Letters he can ever remember meeting.

He gets a steady stare, like Zimmerman’s taking an x-ray of his head. “Hm,” the man grunts, and then crosses one very long leg over the other at the knee, leaning back. “No, I haven’t heard from John, not in a couple of months. He came through here back in September, borrowed a volume of Akkadian curse work—which I want back, by the way—and blew right out of town. I fended him off on Patterson, poor kid.” His eyebrows pop up. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Sam says. Okay. September. That’s at least a point to work from. “Thanks for your time, sir.”

“Thanks for the delivery,” Zimmerman says. He lifts his chin, considering Sam again. “You tell your brother, if he ever gets tired of that bunker, I’ll sponsor his training to Adept. Could use some fresh blood around here.” He squints at Sam. “Maybe you could take your turn minding the homestead, hm?”

“Yeah,” Sam says, and hopes that his feelings don’t show on his face. He manages a smile that feels polite enough. “Thanks, Warder.”

He’s waved out, Zimmerman dismissing him in favor of the books, and he backs out of the office, closing the door firmly behind him and holding onto the knob for a few almost-dizzy seconds. Dean the Warder, Sam stuck down in the bunker instead. God. He is absolutely not passing any of that along to Dean.
The porter—Ben—is nowhere to be seen. The hall’s dim, lit with those antique-feeling amber lights, the bare bulbs’ filaments spots of gold that lead the way down the dusty, shadowed corridor to where the archway into the library room waits, bright. Sam breathes the sage-smoke air, thinking. September. That’s three months of wandering to cover. He licks his lips and pushes off the door, back down the long hall. A light has come on behind one of the frosted-glass windows. More people here than in Portsmouth.

Jake’s now braced over one of the reading tables, a pile of at least a dozen books suddenly around him, writing something in what looks like one of those cheapy black and white composition notebooks. “Hey there,” Sam says, and Jake squints up at him like he’s completely forgotten who Sam even is. “Working on anything interesting?”

Jake frowns. He’s got a milky complexion, pale eyes, like something turned up under a rock. “Yes?” he says, after a long pause.

Sam waits for anything else, and nothing comes. Well, okay then. Cut to the chase: “So, the Warder mentioned you met my father a few months back.” Jake blinks. “Warder Winchester. John Winchester?”

A slow blink and then Jake’s mouth turns into an O. “Winchester!” he says, like it’s a whole new concept. Sam nods, encouraging. Good lord. This guy must have come out of the womb an absent-minded professor. “Of course, of course. Knew his stuff about ghouls.”

“Ghouls?” Sam tries to fit that with anything they’ve guessed their dad could be working on. “He came asking about ghouls?”

“No, no,” Jake says, waving his hands. “That’s what I’m working on. A treatise, with Freddie—our newest initiate, great guy, very neat handwriting—on ghoulish personality replication and memory simulacra. Winchester gave us some tips on texts to source.”

“Dad definitely knows the lore,” Sam says. Jake nods, eyes drifting back down to his books, and Sam hurriedly continues. “When you talked, do you have any idea where he was heading next?”

No sense trying to dissemble; Jake will probably barely remember this conversation, if he’s even paying attention to it at all. Sam gets a frown, Jake running his hand through his hair again so it stands up like a pompadour, and then he calls out Freddie! in a high thin yelp. Sam flinches, but a door somewhere down the hall opens, and the now-revealed Freddie turns out to be a vaguely good-looking guy around Sam’s age in slacks and suspenders who looks extremely surprised to see someone else in the library vault.

“Winchester,” Jake says, waving vaguely at Sam, and Freddie’s eyebrows go high. “You remember?”

“Of course I remember,” Freddie says, and shakes his head. Jake’s already back to his books, flipping through and muttering something indistinct, and Freddie comes forward and shakes Sam’s hand—firm, reasonable, looking Sam in the eye. “You are not John Winchester, unless some things have changed.”

“Sam,” he says, and Freddie smiles, letting go of his hand after a brief squeeze. “So, you met my dad? The Warder said something about a book of curses.”

“The Akkadian volumes, yes.” Freddie’s mouth curls up, a sort-of smile. He leans a hip against one of the library tables, slides a hand into his pocket. “Warder Winchester was very interested in the cursework involving demonic magic in the fourth volume, as I recall. Very interested, and very
interesting, too. Didn’t know he had a son.”

Freddie’s eyes slide down Sam’s body and Sam realizes, oh. Oh. Been a while. He takes half a step back, folds his arms over his chest before he remembers how dorkily defensive that looks and then, well, it’s too late to change it. “Yeah,” he says, inanely, and when Freddie’s eyebrows go up in amusement Sam hurries to say: “Were the books for a research project he was working on? I didn’t realize he was so interested in curses.”

It’s a longshot, and Freddie’s one-shouldered shrug seals it. “I’m only an initiate. I’m not even cleared to know what house he’s the Warder of, not like he’d let me in on anything else. And Jake here might be the Second but I doubt there was much communication there.” Jake glances up with a hm? but his focus doesn’t shift from whatever he’s writing out, and Freddie rolls his eyes. “See. It’s the most I can do to get him to eat something, go to bed sometimes. It’s an interesting project, don’t get me wrong, but some of us still plan to have a life.”

He’s very smooth, Sam will give him that. He pushes his hair back from his face, clears his throat. “Ghouls, huh? Yeah, it sounds—very interesting.” Too much to hope for that Dad showed his cards to a random dippy Second and a brand-new initiate.

“Particularly so because of whatever’s been going on in the city,” Freddie says, “with the deaths.”

Sam frowns, entirely diverted. “What deaths?”

He gets another raised eyebrow, though this time it’s less flirtation and more genuine surprise. “Ah, but then I suppose it might not have made the national papers, yet,” he murmurs, and shakes his head. “Women being killed. Not so many or so fast that it’d cause too much suspicion, but the suspects are loved ones who swear they have nothing to do with it. Witnesses insist that they do. Simulacra, perhaps.” Freddie shrugs. “Of course, they might just be crazy men. My money’s on a demon. Learning and wiping memories, it’s not exactly unheard of.”

Something must happen on Sam’s face because Freddie puts his hand out, frowning. “Don’t worry, there’s no way a demon is ever getting in here,” he says. “If it even is one.”

“If it is,” Sam says, mind racing ahead. A demon—a real demon, here. If they could trap it, they could ask it anything, everything. Sam shakes Freddie’s hand, says, “Thank you, it was nice to meet you—I’ve got to go—” and then he’s climbing the stairs, texting Dean as he goes to come pick him up. If it’s a demon, then they have work to do. Murders of women. He didn’t even ask Freddie how they’d died. If it was fire—

Ben sits silent just inside the doorway, placid as stone. Sam has to sit on the bench beside the access elevator, heart pounding from the long climb up the stairs and also from the fever of speculation lighting up his blood on the inside. He’s never hoped for a demonic possession more.

*'

Off-campus, so there’s no chance that Zimmerman might decide to nip out for a coffee and could recognize Dean being where he very much isn’t supposed to be, they’re sitting at a computer bank in a city library under a huge bank of windows, and they’re arguing.

“Hang on,” Dean says, “go back to the part where you want to try to fight a demon.”

Sam rolls back from the computer, rubbing his forehead. They’re not alone in the library, this time—there’s a mom a few computers down, reading something while trying to bobble her baby in her lap, and a maybe-homeless guy hunkered over the monitored in the row behind them, and normal St.
Louis people going about their business in the shelves. Not private, and they have to keep their voices low and secret. It’s helping, because he can’t yell at Dean.

“If there’s a demon working through people in the city,” Sam says, very quietly, for what feels like the fourth time, “then if we can catch it, we could question it. See if it knows anything about what happened to Jennifer. To Mom.”

Dean stares at him, eyes tight. “You think there’s some demon newsletter they all get?” he says, and Sam does kick him for that one, even if it’s just under the desk, and Dean flinches and nods. “Okay—okay, sorry. I just—Sam, it’s a long shot. By any standard, it’s a really long shot.”

There’s a spike of headachey pain behind Sam’s right eye. He presses his fingers into the socket and takes a deep breath. “I know,” he says. “But why not try? If anyone knows how to take care of a demon in this town, it’s us. If there was any chance, and we didn’t take it—” He cuts himself off.

Silence, broken by the low murmur of the librarian talking to some people over at the information desk. The baby makes a babbling noise and the mom shushes it, jingles the rattly toy she’s been keeping just out of reach. When Sam opens his eyes again, Dean’s looking at the desk, tracing some shape over and over on the scarred particle board surface, and Sam turns away, leans back in the chair and looks up at the huge wall of glass. Foggy day, and cold enough that the fog hasn’t burned away with the morning, so the view down the street’s blurred and insubstantial. Like things aren’t quite real. Sounds about right.

The research hasn’t given them much. St. Louis isn’t exactly a crime-free town, but outright murders in domestic settings are good newspaper fodder, and they’ve found some clips on the local news sites. Brutal murders, the women beaten to death and cut up. Beyond a crime of passion. First arrest was Zach Warren, the second Alex Shinkoda, and both men swore to the police that it wasn’t them, that it couldn’t possibly have been them, but witnesses said different. Sam tries to imagine it and it’s a horror story. Something taking your body, forcing you to do horrific things to the person you love most. The women, tied up and looking into faces they thought were familiar.

“If we do this, we have to be careful,” Dean says, very quiet. “This isn’t some ghost. This is something that can move in the world. It can be anyone, any time. We’re protected against possession, but demons can do a lot worse than just possess you.”

Sam finds himself touching the center of his chest, where the tattoo no longer stings. They’ve never come into contact with a demon. Theory’s been enough so far; it had better be enough this time.

Dean licks his lips and looks Sam in the eyes, and seems to make some kind of decision. “Okay.” He nods at the computer, where the story of Lindsay Shinkoda’s sad end fills up the screen. “How are we going to play this?”

Suited, they’re well-dressed, trustworthy reporters checking back with neighbors and witnesses to follow up on a horrible story. Emily Dawkins’ neighbor says that he saw Zach Warren go into Emily’s apartment building, that he waved and smiled and didn’t seem any different. Becky Warren insists that her brother couldn’t possibly have done this, that she knows he’s innocent, that the cops have it all wrong. Outside the Shinkodas’ building, the crime tape has been taken down, and Dean ducks in to check out the scene while Sam talks to the barista at the coffee shop across the street. Alex and Lindsay, the perfect couple, young and successful and happy. “I don’t know how he could do it,” the guy says, leaning on the counter and looking across the street with Sam. The shop’s playing Christmas music, like everywhere else, and the soft fairy lights and decorative holly and the fake cinnamon smell doesn’t quite fit the expression on the guy’s face. “To your wife? How could
you?"

“I don’t know,” Sam says, and his throat’s tight enough that it barely comes out. What body did the
demon use when it killed Jennifer, he wonders. He guesses he has to count himself lucky that it
wasn’t his own.

Dean slips out of the building across the way; Sam picks up the two coffees he’d almost forgotten
about and thanks the guy and crosses the street, the chilly wind prickling ice against his cheeks.
Dean’s got their dad’s old peacoat buttoned up so the flap’s closed across his chest, his hands shoved
into his pockets, and he takes the coffee when Sam holds it out but he doesn’t look happy about it.
“What’s the story?” Sam says, and Dean shrugs, staring down at the flimsy plastic lid. “Let me
guess. Good guy, how could he, what a perfect couple?!”

“Yeah,” Dean says, soft. He takes a gulp of coffee and doesn’t elaborate, his shoulders curved in
against the cold.

A couple walks past on the sidewalk, gloved hands clasped as they lean into each other. Sam
shuffles out of the way, leaning against the building next to Dean, and watches them go. The man’s
tall, shoulder tucked in over the woman’s, and she giggles at something he says, her pinked face
turned up to his. If something took his body, he could take her apart in less than ten minutes. Sam’s
stomach turns over.

“I don’t get the motive,” Sam says, finally. This is a nice street, nice area. The Dawkins murder was
the same, more or less. Not all that far from here. “If you’re a demon, I mean. The women don’t have
anything in common that we could figure out; the guys haven’t even met, that we know of. Not a
deal, right? They’ve got nothing to do with each other, so what would the deal even be?”

Dean takes the lid off his coffee and the steam gouts up. He turns the lid around and around between
his fingers, thinking. “Maybe it’s just sowing evil,” he says, finally. “If it is a demon, after all. What
other motive does it need besides causing pain?”

Sam takes a deep breath, bringing the cold into the pit of his chest. The texts have always been—
abstract. Academic. The Men of Letters know almost everything there is to know about demons,
about how they move in the world, about deals and power, about how to control them, about how to
defend oneself against the enemy. What they don’t know is where they come from, and why. When
he was a kid Sam thought it just made sense: demons have to exist in the same way angels did.
Balance. Evil brought into the world to provide a purpose for the great fight. As an adult, he’s not so
sure.

“We need more information,” Dean says. “And gloves. It’s freezing here.”

“It’s freezing in Kansas,” Sam says. Dean glares at him. “Baby.” Sam smiles at him, just to be
annoying, but he’s thinking. They haven’t actually been able to get into either of the apartments to
test for any signs of a demon’s passing. Here, the apartment was still locked up six ways from
Sunday, with the murder so recent. “Any way to break into the Shinkodas’ place?”

“Not unless we develop invisibility and get some kind of sound muffling spell cast over the whole
floor,” Dean says. He pauses for a second, squinting. “I could actually pull that second one if we got
our hands on some Solomon’s Seal and cardinal blood, but there are cameras everywhere in there.
Looked a little more high-tech than most of the systems Dad taught me to cut.”

Why the demon had to pick people with a good HOA, Sam doesn’t know. He bites his tongue,
thinking back. Earlier this morning they only got to talk to the neighbors with the Dawkins murder.
Lots of people around, with the day starting. Most of them were students, like Emily—maybe a little
more well-off than Sam and his friends had been, but still students. He tries to picture the building. “There weren’t cameras at Emily’s, were there?”

“Not that I remember,” Dean says, and then he sighs. “You want to break in?”

“You said we needed more information,” Sam says. He checks his watch: after one o’clock, now, not exactly a high-traffic moment. If her neighbors aren’t in class, there’s a good chance they’re at work, or sleeping, or studying frantically for finals. “We can get in and out before anyone notices we’re there. If we get flagged we can say we’re FBI, checking out the crime scene.”

“I’m going to regret making you that badge,” Dean says, shaking his head, but he stands up straight and drains the last few swallows of his coffee like he’s chugging a beer. Not that Dean has ever in his life chugged a beer. “Fine. If we get caught, you owe me so much more coffee.”

“When don’t you think I owe you coffee?” Sam says, and Dean shoves at his shoulder to get him moving, and they go and find the car.

Emily’s building is farther from the Arch, closer to campus. Back down Washington under a grey sky, clouds moving in. The fog might dissipate only under the threat of more snow. Dean parks on the street and they walk around the back of the building toward the fire escape, the dumpsters. There’s a door here in the back, too, marked **Maintenance**, and there’s no alarm on it, and a lock Sam could have picked when he was twelve. Perfect.

The crime tape’s still over the door for them both to duck under, but there’s no one in the hall, and Sam closes the door firmly behind them and uses the small pocket flashlight to illuminate the dim living room. The chair’s still sitting right in the middle of the room. Bloodstains gone to rust, on the cushion and hardwood, and Sam licks his lips, bites them, breathes in slow through his nose. Most of the evidence has of course been bundled away to the station, he assumes, but the cops don’t know how much they might have left behind.

Dean’s taking the packet he made out of his coat pocket, over at the little dining table under the cat painting. Sam finds a ceramic plate in the kitchen to use as an ashtray and Dean constructs the spell in less than five minutes: sage and vervain, consecrated oil, a few drops of blood that Sam provides from the mound under his thumb, and with a murmur of Romanian and a dropped match a wisp of bluish smoke curls into the still air and then swirls through the whole apartment, faint light following it. Dean frowns. “It’d turn gold if there were sulfur,” he whispers, and Sam rubs his mouth.

Nothing at the windows, or in the vents, where a demon might lurk until the victim came near. Sam rubs his knuckles along the back of the chair and sniffs, but there’s no rotten-grey stench, no smell of anything but dust and flaking iron. The empty apartment is just that: empty. A shell, where life once was.

Another test, another spell—dredged up from Sam’s memory this time, a glimpse into past magics worked, and the only thing that comes up is the sulfur-detection ritual. Nothing. Dean pats his shoulder, folds up his little envelope of herbs, and Sam flicks off the flashlight and opens up the door, thinking of where they could possibly go after this, and there’s a girl standing in the hallway with her key in the next door over, and she stares at them open-mouthed for a long stupid second before Sam drags in a breath and says, “Can I help you, ma’am?”

She blinks, looks between him and Dean. Going on the offensive, usually a good bet. “I—what were you doing in—Emily’s apartment is a crime scene, I’m pretty sure no one’s supposed to go in there.”

“FBI, miss,” Dean says, smoothly flashing his badge. Sam gives her a tight smile. Dean’s not one to talk about misusing fake authority. “Just following up on the investigation. Did you know Ms.
The girl turns out to be twenty-one, and a fellow student, and named Kelly. Dean knows how to do this kind of questioning, it’s the thing he’s best at, and so Sam makes a show of investigating the hallway, running his flashlight along the baseboards and lintels, checking for that faintest grit of yellow powder, a trace of blood, anything. Kelly tells Dean all about how Emily was just such a good neighbor, and how Zach wasn’t around much but whenever he visited they just seemed so great. Same story, all over. There’s a window at the end of the hall, frosted glass, and when Sam drags it open—ah, fire escape. He looks out over the alley from the third-floor vantage point. It’s long, busy with utility poles and wires, access for trash and recycling trucks. Anyone could come back here and no one would question it.

He’s lowering the window back down when he sees it, frozen into the ice on the black handrail for the fire escape. Dean’s still talking to the girl, his professional face on, and she’s unloading on him about something Sam can’t quite hear. He ducks under the window, steps out into the freezing air, crouches down to look closer. Yeah, that’s… blood. Hard to see, unless the light’s clear grey, the ice just the right thickness to see through without melting away. Blood, a smear like a soaked hand gripped there for purchase for just a second before someone clattered down the metal stairs. Sam braces his hands on the railing and leans out, looking down into the alley again. A getaway? But demons don’t need that—it could smoke out in a second, leave the possessed body behind to be caught. He stares down at the alley’s asphalt, the blackened dirty snow piled up in the corners, the dumpsters.

When he climbs back inside, Dean’s nodding politely at Kelly, giving her a smooth professional smile and shaking her hand. “We’ll come again, if we need to ask any more questions,” he says, and she ducks her head and nods, smiles back at him before she gets her door safely shut. The smile wipes off of Dean’s face in a second and he closes his eyes, shakes his head, before he turns a hard look on Sam.

“You were supposed to take the questions,” he mutters, coming up to the window.

“Says who?” says Sam, and then before Dean can say anything he jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “There’s blood. On the fire escape.”

Dean’s brow crumples and he leans out of the window, his hands braced on the wide sill. “What,” he says, under his breath. “You think—”

“Who else would it be?” Sam says, and Dean pulls back in, close enough that he has to crane his neck up to frown at Sam. “I know, but—I mean, it’s right there. But Zach was arrested in the apartment, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Dean says, some thought Sam can’t read swirling behind his face, but—this is a lead, more or less, and Sam doesn’t want to wait. He climbs back out, touches the glaze of ice trapping the blood beneath it. If it had warmed up too much, if the ice had melted, the blood might have washed away. Lucky them.

Behind him, Dean says, “Sammy—” but Sam’s going down the fire escape stairs, keeping his eyes on the railing to catch any drop of rusty red that might peek through the frozen rails. There, just before the ladder-drop, another smear, almost a full handprint. Sam drops the ladder and, oh, he can imagine it now, the demon maybe running down here and hiding out somewhere, clearing itself up, clearing out Zach’s memory, walking back up to the apartment and smoking out and poor Zach would shake his head and think, oh, he was here to visit Emily…

Sam climbs down the ladder, the metal so cold his hands are going numb, and when he hits the alley
floor the maintenance door opens and Dean’s staring at him. “What are you doing?” he says, and Sam shakes his head, rubs his freezing hands against his coat, looking around, says: “There’s something—he came down this way, it did, I know it. Where did it go?”

Blood, blood. The cops wouldn’t have any reason to check back here, their culprit was standing right in front of them and there was no sign of flight. Nothing on the dumpsters, nothing on the walls, and the alley’s long, long and accessible, and Dean follows behind him saying, “I’m not sure—” but there, yes, on the utility pole, and there, on the sewer grate. The sewer.

They have a map of St. Louis in the glovebox that Sam picked up. He spreads it out on the trunk lid, Dean looking skeptical over his shoulder, and he marks their location and then the apartment the Shinkodas shared. A line drawn between them ends up being pretty straight, the neighborhoods clustered close together. The sewer, connecting them. “Why would a demon nest in the sewer?” Dean says, bewildered.

“I don’t know, Dean, but look, there’s the blood, there’s the connection,” Sam says. “Maybe it—I don’t know! Maybe it has a host it keeps down there, maybe it spies on people, gets ready to jump bodies and then hides out? But that’s our only lead.” His stomach trembles, nervous. This is the best shot they’ve had in, god, more than a month. Since the smoke billowed forth out of his burned-out husk of an apartment, back in Boston.

“Sam,” Dean starts, but he’s got that uncertain cant to it and Sam doesn’t want to hear it, not now. “What do we have?” he interrupts. Dean frowns at him and Sam jerks a thumb at the narrow aisle between the buildings, back out to where the Impala’s waiting. “To trap a demon. What do we have? Iron, salt? Do you still remember the exorcism?”

“Oh course I remember the exorcism,” Dean says. He blows out a long foggy breath and props his hands on his hips. “You don’t want the exorcism, though, you want the *incarcerazione*, and are you hearing yourself? This is what you want to do?”

It’s serious, not an accusation. Not big brother condescending to some stupid plan, like that time Sam wanted to climb the plant above the bunker. Sam turns around, looks up at the iron sky. His heart’s pounding like they’re already in the fight. “This is why we’re hunting,” he says, finally. “This is the whole thing. We have to try.”

Quiet back here, with the buildings all around blocking the traffic-noise from the streets. Sam can hear the scuff of Dean’s shoe on the cold asphalt, the sigh he lets out. “I’ll move the car back here. Hang on.”

With the Impala backed in close against the building, Dean unlocks the trunk and lifts the false bottom that Dad installed who knows how long ago. Along with Dean’s assortment of spell ingredients, there are the weapons they’ve inherited, the knives and long blades, blackened iron and copper and gleaming silver, all the things Dean’s been maintaining for years. Just in case. Sam tucks a flask of holy water into his jacket pocket, a packet of salt into his coat, and Dean pulls out the flat cherrywood case and opens it to reveal, oh. Their two pistols. Been a long time. “You kept it,” Sam says, and Dean gives him a sidelong look and says, “Of course I kept it,” and holds out Sam’s Taurus for him to take, handle-first. The ivory grips still feel familiar and he racks it, surprised to find it smooth and perfect. He hasn’t shot with this in, god, four years. All those long afternoons of range practice, left behind.

Dean’s got the same Colt, gleaming and pretty, engraved with fine leaves. His hands move over it surely, checking everything over just as Sam’s doing to his own, even though they’ve clearly been perfectly maintained. When they were teenagers Sam used to make fun of Dean’s girl-gun; Dean
would retaliate by completely destroying him in one of their shooting tests. They were both given by their dad, when each of them turned twelve—something of their own to practice with, to be kept, not part of the bunker’s small armory of sturdy but boring pieces. When he left, Sam regretted leaving his Taurus behind, no matter that he was trying to make a clean break. So little was actually his.

No rounds in either of them, and Dean flips the case over, opens the other side, and there’s a neatly-arrayed collection of magazines, split between their two sizes. Dean picks out the third and fourth one over for each of them, hands Sam his before closing the case. “Consecrated iron,” he says, slotting in the first of his. “Won’t do much, but it might slow the demon down.”

Sam loads his Taurus, jerking his chin at the case. “When did you do all that?” he says. “What else is in there?”

Dean shrugs, slipping the spare magazine into his coat pocket. “Silver, blooded steel, brass.” Brass, wow—well, that’ll be useful if they ever run into a harpy. Dean opens up the tackle-like box where he keeps reagents and picks out a sleek black feather, a handful of small white flowers Sam can’t identify off the top of his head, and tucks those into a little leather bag in his inside suit pocket. When he stands up he blinks at Sam staring at him, and then rolls his eyes. “I’m prepared, sue me.”

“Prepared is one word for it,” Sam says.

“You’re welcome,” says Dean, pointedly, and closes the trunk.

Salt, iron, rituals remembered and waiting on the tip of their tongues. There’s nothing more to do, nothing more that will prepare them than this. It’s not even three o’clock in the afternoon, yet. Dean smooths his hair back and Sam makes sure he can grab the gun easy from his coat pocket. They don’t have jacket holsters—well, more’s the pity, and it’s something they’ll have to rectify if they make it out. When they make it out. He takes a deep cleansing breath, prickly ice in through his nose and a billow of fog through his mouth, and sends up a quick, wordless prayer. He doesn’t even know what for, but he thinks it all the same, and then he nods at Dean and Dean presses his lips together, and then they go over and figure out how to lever up a sewer access cover.

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An hour of walking and Sam’s confidence is flagging. It might be the smell. “Maybe the demon prefers a nice, normal library,” Dean mutters, behind him. “A flower garden. A soap store.”

“Soap store?” Sam whispers back. “Shut up.”

They’re trying to move quiet, but it’s hard to see even with the maintenance running lights strung through the tunnels. The running water helps—well, Sam prefers to think of it as water. Sam’s taken point, Dean covering his back, and he has his flashlight aimed low to find his footing and his gun gripped tight in his other hand, his trigger-finger held safely against the low barrel but with every distant plink and rattle and surge of water he sucks in a breath through his teeth and wants to shoot something. There hasn’t been sight nor sign of anything, other than the smear of dried blood they found on the ladder down into the walkways, and Dean swears they haven’t been walking in circles, but it feels like it.

“Sam,” Dean whispers, and there’s a touch to his back. Sam freezes, and Dean pats his left shoulder, and points to where his flashlight’s illuminating a small gleaming circle of damp stone, and—rust-brown, smeared low on the wall as though someone caught their balance there. Something, at last, and Sam’s heart comes up to his throat. He glances back and Dean’s grim-faced, but he nods, and so Sam leads again, to the branch in the walkway, left toward whatever’s waiting.
They’re getting further from the running water. A line of dim lights run down the corridor, but it’s hard to see into the distance. Along the wall run ordered lines of thick cables, maybe power or data, Sam doesn’t know and doesn’t care, because there, more blood, and again. How much was spilled? Maybe the demon’s host was hurt. He adjusts his grip on his gun, breathes carefully through his open mouth so it’ll be quieter. He wishes he’d worn boots instead of the dress shoes Dean insisted on. Behind him, Dean’s making almost no noise except for the faintest strike of his heels on the concrete, and before they reach the next turn Sam cranes his head back and whispers, “Careful,” and sees Dean’s eyes go wide and his mouth open shocked and then—

Ringing ears, a blur of muddy light. Iron at the back of his tongue. A blink, two, and he can’t see—he can’t see—but, oh. Oh. Something, covering his head. His breath humid and sour, puffing against cloth held close against his face, and he’s—oh. Something…

A scuff, a scuffle? He tries to pick up his head and there’s a steel bar of pain across the back of his skull, pain that wraps around his brain like a vise and stretches down to his neck, his shoulders, an unending shocking thrum that’s hard to think around. He holds very still, breathing shallow against the thought of moving again, and he’s surprised he’s alive, it hurts so much. People die from blows to the head. All the time, if you believe Austen novels, and Jenn lets him make fun of the over-dramatic injuries in her books but she still says Austen was the greatest English novelist of all time, no matter her shaky grasp of logistics, and Sam’s argument—Sam’s argument is—

He has a concussion, he’s pretty sure. He blinks, water running down his cheeks, and tries to keep his eyes open. He can’t see, only he can. Cloth over his head, but light coming through it, enough that the world’s more than black. Another scuff, somewhere, and he turns his head to follow it and the bolt of pain feels like it spikes straight through his eye-socket from the back of his skull, but he’s awake, and he’s not dead, and Jenn is and he—he knows what’s going on. The demon. They walked into it and it—Dean.

“Dean?” he says. His voice comes out an almost useless croak.

“Mm,” comes a little hum, from somewhere. He closes his eyes. Thank god. “Right here.”

Dean’s voice, low. “Are you okay?” Sam manages. Alive is one thing, whole is another. “What happened?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” the voice says. It sounds strange. Sam’s ears aren’t working right, still, everything traveling to him as though through dark water. “Sam.”

“I’m here,” Sam says. He tugs at his hands. Tied, behind him, with rough rope or twine, and he grasps at the pole he’s harnessed to, details trickling in. His coat’s gone, and his gun’s who knows where. Rope around his chest, tying his ankles together. Sitting duck, he thinks, and then: “Why hasn’t it killed us, already?”

“Waste not,” Dean says, and—what? Scuff, footsteps, and Sam’s still trying to make sense of what, how is Dean not tied, and then rough hands grab his shoulder, drag the bag off his head, and light floods in, so bright that Sam’s wavery vision sparks and shatters, tears streaming up to protect his eyes, and he scrunches his lids closed and turns away, gasping, and it’s a minute before he can get himself together. God, that hurts. Feels like he was hit with a tire iron.

“Sam,” he hears, distant, and fingers grasp his chin, pulls his face up into the light, searing red through his eyelids. “Sammy.”
A brief blunt touch smearing the tear-trails on his cheeks and then nothing. Sam swallows hard, slits his eyelids cautiously, and there’s—Dean, crouched in front of him. He’s watching Sam, eyes narrowed a little like an inspection. “Untie me, man,” Sam says. “We need to get out of here.”

Silence. Dean tilts his head, then flinches like he just got struck with a migraine throb. Sam knows how that feels. “Did it get you, too?” he says. His ears won’t stop ringing. He tugs at his wrists. It’s not the best knot ever, there’s some give, but he won’t have to try to untie it. Dean’ll get him out.

“You know, I’ve been around for a few years,” Dean says—amused? Sam frowns, squints up at him. He’s giving Sam that same assessing look. “This is definitely the strangest body I’ve ever had.”

It takes a second. Concussion. The horror blooms up so slow and certain that Sam genuinely forgets to breathe, and gasps after a weird long second. “No,” he says, pressing himself back against the pole. “You can’t, there’s no way. We’re protected.”

Dean’s face curls into a puzzled smile. “No one’s protected against me, Sammy,” it says, and then it stands up, smooth, and—behind it, Dean’s slumped against a support beam, a bruise covering his cheek, tied up and crashed just as much as Sam is. Sam stares, panting, and then stares up.

“You’re not a demon,” he says, confusion making him as sick as the head injury is, and gets a frown in return. “You’re—you’re supposed to be a demon.”

“Sorry to disappoint, buddy,” the thing says, Dean’s rich amused voice just coming out wrong, what on earth is going on. “I didn’t even know there were demons until about, oh, fifteen minutes ago. Your brother’s head is full of all kinds of interesting information.” Tap to the temple and a smile, and then it flinches again, Dean’s face twisting into a grimace. “Too much information, maybe. Most people are so boring, but you. Wow.”

Simulacra, Sam thinks, unbidden. Not-Dean, and now that Sam’s looking closer its clothes are all wrong. Suit trousers, but it’s wearing a grey undershirt beneath Dad’s peacoat. The shape’s right but it’s physical, not a mirage or a glamour—not a thief or a conman, but a forger. “You’re a shapeshifter,” he says, the truth assembling itself behind his eyes far too late, and gets another quick grin.

“Got it in—two. Sorry, no prizes.” The shapeshifter cracks its neck, looks over its false shoulder at where Dean’s still out cold. “My old body was in jail, his face plastered all over town, and I was looking for a new one when, hey, here you come. People don’t usually walk right into my home and offer themselves up.” It shifts its shoulders, like settling into a coat. “Thanks for making it easy.”

For a second Sam wants nothing more in the world than for Dean to wake up, for them to be in this together. His thoughts are still moving way too slow to handle what’s happening. “What do you want with Dean’s body, anyway?” Sam says. It licks its lips, sets its teeth in the bottom one. “You killed Alex’s wife, didn’t you? Zach’s girlfriend? Dean doesn’t have anyone, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Oh, I’m well aware,” it says. “Poor schmuck.” It walks over—boots, blood smeared rusty on the toes, god—and pats Dean on the head. Sam strains forward, pointlessly, the rope biting into his chest. “The more I become him, the more I think: what a sad, pointless little life he has.” It tilts its head, breathes in. “I have.”

It looks at Sam and for a second it really does look like Dean, in a strange rung-bell familiarity that’s hard to shake. His eyes, known and knowing, and the small curl to one corner of his mouth, dry and amused. “You don’t have any idea, do you,” Dean says, and Sam swallows. Not Dean. He knows it’s not, the evidence is right in front of him, but he remembers learning about shapeshifters, as a kid.
The memories flood in, the longer the shifter has the living body to work from, and eventually, what is a person but their bodies, their memories? The shifter pulls back the coat sleeve and there’s the sun tattoo, half-formed, the ink slowly bleeding up out of the pale empty skin. “All this work. All this studying. Learning, inventing, doing everything I possibly could. It was never enough. I was never good enough.”

“That’s not true,” Sam says, and then clacks his teeth shut. Nothing to gain from talking to this thing. It is not his brother.

“No?” It taps Dean’s wrist, then traces his fingers around the tattoo’s formed shape in the exact way Dean showed Sam, those weeks ago, and murmurs lux. Nothing happens, and it snorts. “Well, there’s a metaphor.” It drops the wrist and fixes its eyes on Sam, and those aren’t Dean’s anymore. There’s a hatred there that Sam’s never seen turned on him, not from his brother. Not from anyone. It comes close, crouches down, elbows planted on its thighs. The coat billows out around it. “If I was good enough, why did you leave? Why did Dad? Why wasn’t I worth—anything?” Its eyes go all over Sam’s face, searching. “You and him. Sometimes I think, I could give up a kidney and it wouldn’t be enough.” Dean’s familiar hand comes forward and holds Sam’s jaw, threateningly tight. Sam tries to pull back and can’t, and gets a small smile for it. “I gave everything for this family. I raised you, I looked after you, I was there when no one else was. And what do I get for it.” It lets go, tucks Sam’s hair behind his ear. He shudders, closes his eyes, but the shapeshifter doesn’t stop talking. Low, like sharing treasured secrets. “Do you know what it’s like down here, when you’re alone? Like being buried alive. Only—no, because when you’re buried alive at least you know that soon you’ll suffocate, and it’ll be over. It was never over. I don’t think it ever will be.”

“What do you want?” Sam manages. He can’t hear any more of this.

When he can stand looking again, the shifter’s watching his mouth, frowning. “Kelly,” it says. It blinks, and then meets Sam’s eyes. “That was her name. She looked at me like—well, like so many people do. Never matters, though. There’s no point.” It shakes its head, touches Dean’s mouth, and then something about its expression shifts. The facade of Dean falling away, its own personality shining through. It’s insane, Sam realizes, far too late. Completely, totally. “What a waste, huh? Well, Kelly’s got a chance. Lucky her.”

A little smile, and the shifter stands up, dragging its knuckles along its jaw. It pulls something out of Dean’s coat pocket—the platinum ring, twisted around between its fingers before it slides it onto the wrong hand. “Who wears silver, anyway,” it says. Sam drags his heels up, pointless squirming, and it comes closer and plants its boot on the knot of rope keeping Sam’s ankles together. “Now, now. I need you alive, don’t make me kill you before I’m ready. Maybe we can go check out this weird house you guys have, huh? I can show you just what it’s like to be buried underground.”

A scrape—Sam jerks, but the shifter turns around faster—in time to catch Dean’s full weight right in the knees, the two of them crashing down next to Sam. A clang like a rung gong, the shifter’s head bouncing off one of the pipes, and Dean’s swarming up over it, swinging, launched straight across the floor and scrambling, the element of surprise still barely on his side. Sam yanks at his ropes, barely loosening up, and Dean’s are still trailing off his wrist, his ankles still tied, but his hands are free to sock the shifter in the jaw, a hard meat-packed thump, bone hitting bone. The shifter shoves, hard, and Dean flops back, smacking into the concrete, and—it’s a horrible mirrored struggle and Sam’s pulling so hard at the rope that he’s gonna dislocate his thumb, god—Dean—and then Dean’s hand comes up with a flash of metal and the shifter rears back, grunts. It lets go of Dean’s throat and Sam can’t see—but Dean heaves in a breath, coughs, and shoves, and the shifter
falls back, and its hand is around the knife embedded in its chest, blood soaking out and turning the grey undershirt a sticky black.

Dean’s coughing, struggling to sit up. “Dean,” Sam says, hardly believing it.

Dean blinks, shakes his head. He gets the ropes off his own ankles and then shoves the shapeshifter, pulls his coat off its suddenly-limp arms, shuffles over on his knees and puts it over Sam’s shoulders, like a shock blanket. “You’re okay?” he says, voice thin.

“Am I—” Sam closes his eyes, groans. He still can’t get his fucking hands loose. “How did you get free?”

“It’s worse at tying knots than Dad,” Dean mutters. He’s touching Sam’s face, fingers moving light and quick over his cheekbones, careful on the back of his head. Sam winces and Dean pulls his head forward, parting his hair and checking over, but there mustn’t be anything too bad because Dean sighs, and slumps down to his knees. His suit jacket’s off, somewhere, stripped to his button-down, his trousers filthy again. “Got lucky.”

“Yeah, real lucky,” Sam says. Dean flicks his shoulder through the thick warmth of the peacoat, then reaches around behind him, tugs the knot loose above where Sam’s fingers couldn’t reach, releases the snare around his chest. Sam wraps his arms around himself, his shoulders screaming relief at the change of position. He didn’t realize how cold he was, and now he’s shivering. Next to him, Dean just sits down, still breathing unsteadily. It happened—so fast. That’s the first thing Dean ever killed, Sam’s pretty sure. He nudges his elbow into Dean’s. “Nice job, man.”

Dean rubs his hand over his head, holds the nape of his neck. “We’re lucky it didn’t check to see if my pocket knife was silver,” he says, after a second.

Typical. Sam leans forward and tugs the ropes off his ankles. “I think you’re the only person on earth who carries a silver pocket knife, so that makes sense.” He wants to sleep for—a month. A year. He can never remember if sleep’s the done thing, with a concussion, assuming he has one. His thoughts are tracking a little faster now. “Paranoid.”

“You’re welcome,” Dean says. He drags his heels in, his arms around his knees, his head drooping down. There’s a big red mark on his temple, like a bruise about to form. His shirt’s torn, at the shoulder, and Sam fumbles one arm free of the warmth of the peacoat and puts his hand there, squeezes. Thanks doesn’t feel like enough.

The shifter’s still. It’s a perfect copy of Dean, more or less, from the neat length of his hair to the tattoos. “The light spell didn’t work,” Sam says, and Dean tips his head, frowning. “The shapeshifter, it—it was downloading you, forming the personality copy with your memories, and it tried to make the light tattoo work and it couldn’t.”

The eye Sam can see closes and Dean presses his forehead back down against his arm. “It didn’t know what it was doing,” he says, sounding exhausted. “Seeing something isn’t the same thing as knowing it.”

Sam chews the inside of his lip. He’s getting warmer, the shivering evening out. Like being buried alive, it had said, a gleam of horrible promise over Dean’s familiar eyes. He wonders. Knowing and understanding aren’t that far apart, and he looks at the shifters dead body rather than look at the real Dean.

Something else, though; he closes his eyes and drags in a slow, steadying breath. He braces one hand behind himself on the pole and gathers up his courage and stands up. Throb of warning from the
back of his skull, but he doesn’t pass out. A win. He drops the peacoat over Dean’s shoulders, takes a deep breath. “We’ve got to clean this up,” he says. Dean grunts a question, and Sam sighs. “Can’t have a body with your face turning up in the St. Louis sewers. What’ll happen if the Letters find out?”

“Oh, god,” Dean mutters, and Sam agrees but there’s nothing for it. Anything else—any questions he has, anything he could ask, whatever he wants to know and whatever he desperately doesn’t want to think about—it all has to wait.

There’s a pile of random belongings in a big crate. Ropes, knives with wicked curves. Sam swallows and shoves them aside, and there’s Dean’s jacket, Sam’s coat, their guns and the spare magazines wrapped up in dirty cloth. Dean’s silver ring is wrapped in a tissue, maybe to sell later, and Sam hands it over to be put back in place, and watches Dean tug the platinum ring off of the shifter’s dead finger and slide it on, to the correct hand this time. Sam takes the job of turning the body over and tugging the silver-bladed pocket knife out of its chest, the sharp edge leaving the dead meat with a grotesque wet noise. Its eyes are half-closed, empty. He stares at its face, can’t help it.

“Burn it,” Dean says, jerking Sam’s attention away. He’s bundled up again, looks almost his normal self. His voice is rough, his eyes tired. He’s staring down at it, too, his jaw hard. “We can use the old clothes and the sheets as kindling. No one will be able to identify it as me after that.” He shrugs. “No dental records.”

Sam tugs the bag it had used on him over its head, before he starts wrapping it up. He can’t look at that face. Dean doesn’t say anything. They wrap it in sheets, in rope. It catches well enough. Sam steps out into the darker corridor, puts his back to the stone wall, the firelight throwing weird shadows that make it hard to find his bearings. Dean stands in the opening to the den and watches, his face unreadable, until he apparently decides that it’s destroyed enough to leave, and then he leads the way out and back to the car. Sam considers calling the cops, for a minute of trudging painfully through the cold dark, but discards the idea. What would he even say. Here’s the real murderer, and no, I know it makes no sense, just trust me? No. Someone else can find the body, one day, or not.

* * *

A foggy night. They play rock-paper-scissors for who has to drive and Sam wins, he always wins, but he takes the keys out of Dean’s hand anyway. Head injury or not, Dean looks like death warmed over, the streetlight casting his face into sharp edges and shadows. His recovered watch says that it’s near midnight. How long were they down there? He puts it out of mind. Dean leans up against the window and the radio’s on low, playing repetitive jazz, and Sam huddles into his coat and just tries to get them across the city in one piece.

Lit-up buildings, Christmas lights. The bridge misty in the fog, following brake lights across the river, and then the quiet empty streets back toward their little craphole motel, and their room, and the overactive furnace makes all his exposed skin prickle painfully as soon as they’re inside. At least it’s warm. Dean drops the room key onto the table between their two beds and rubs both hands over his face, his whole body slumped, and now they have time, they’re quiet and together and there’s no horrible effigy burning a dozen feet away but Sam’s voice still stops in his throat.

Dean takes a shower. Fair, he’s the one who was wrestling around on the floor with the monster. Sam takes off his coat, his shoes, his suit jacket. Hard to believe where the day started. All that certainty burnt to dust. Dad in the wind and the demon no closer. What kind of day has it been, Sam thinks, and sits down and drops his head back to the thin pillow. The shower’s running, the light dim, and he closes his eyes. Thank god for silver pocket knives, he thinks, and then he’s asleep.

* * *
He wakes up with a killer headache, his shoulders sore from being wrenched around and tied up. In the shower he finds a huge blackening bruise on his hip from—when? Only the monster could know, and it’s dead, its body either ash or melted down to that semi-gelatinous substance they read about when they were kids. Always sounded sort of cool, like the goop they’d advertise during commercial breaks on the few Saturday morning cartoons they’d get in Lebanon. The revolting puddles of sloughed skin and lymph scattered around the thing’s lair weren’t quite as cool as he’d hoped. Not to mention the smell.

Even with everything, after checkout and gathering Dean up and depositing them both in yet another diner with decent wi-fi, he’s feeling okay. Headache aside, and that’s nothing that time and three aspirin and a mega-sized cup of coffee won’t fix. Dean’s slumped on his elbows over his own cup, looking like he’s recovering from a hangover. He checked Sam’s skull again before they left, his face pinched as his fingers worked light and quick over the bruise, but apparently nothing was too wrong. His own almost-bruise is gone, already, everything about him looking fine other than how pale and tired he is. “You okay?” Sam says, finally, looking over the top of his laptop screen. He didn’t want to ask last night, because—because. Now, the gentle noise of the diner and soft country on the radio and people bustling around, it doesn’t feel as dangerous a question. “Shifter didn’t get you too bad, did he?”

“It,” Dean corrects, automatically, and Sam rolls his eyes. Dean shakes his head, though, wrapping his hand around his steaming mug. His silver ring clacks gently on the ceramic. “No, I’m okay.” He sits up a little more, touches his ribs with his free hand. “Didn’t even cut me, it was just blunt force. I’ll be fine. Your brain’s the one I’m worried about.”

“Thanks,” Sam says, dry, and Dean blinks and then lets out a small huff of breath. The healing tattoo—of course. Proof again, that the spells are working, but instead of impressed he just feels sort of uneasy. The shifter’s poison keeps shouting from the back of his head. Hard to ignore, harder to forget. “You still look kind of rough, man.”

Dean shrugs, one shouldered. “It’s a process,” he says. “Don’t worry about it.”

Just blunt force, it’s fine. Sam sucks his lower lip between his teeth and nods, even if he wants to argue, and he looks down at his laptop so there’s something to occupy his eyes. He closes out of the news site—it’s looking like there might be some inconsistent evidence with the Warren case, according to sources inside the DA’s office, so hopefully at least one of the men won’t take the rap for a monster—and tries to figure out a plan for what to do next. Their dad wanted a book on demonic curses from Zimmerman’s chapterhouse, and why? Where could he have gone with that, and how could they follow?

The waitress arrives with beautiful plates of steaming protein. Dean goes for the bacon first, of course, wolfing it down while he reads a folded square of newspaper, and Sam has got to stop thinking about this. How much truth is possible coming from the mouth of a murderer?

“Hey, I was thinking,” Sam says, around a mouthful of pancakes. “If you want, we can swing back to the bunker.” Dean’s eyes jerk up to his face, surprised, and Sam shrugs, tries to play it cool. “I was just looking up how to set up call forwarding to a cell phone. So you won’t miss too much, if one of the chapterhouses calls. What do you think?”

Dean swallows, fork in the air. “I—yeah. Yes, that’d help.” His eyes narrow, searching Sam’s face, and then they drop back to his plate, a line between his eyebrows. “Thanks, Sammy.”

Sam fills his mouth with eggs instead of answering. Thanks, he says. Like a single, stupid gesture could ever be enough. It’s what Sam has for now, though. Everything else that’s not breakfast will just have to wait.
Kansas is colder than when they left it. A milk-white shroud of clouds and snow on the ground, so there’s hardly a difference between sky and horizon. The world a solemn snowglobe. Sam’s glad for his gloves when he jumps out and opens up the gate to the bunker’s grounds again, and he gets in this time to let Dean ferry them quietly from the boundary line. He parks inside, this time, swinging the car around and gliding smoothly backwards along the sloped driveway to the garage. Not for the first time, Sam wishes there were some automatic sensor to open up the garage doors, but he hops out again and takes care of it and watches Dean slip the Impala back into its spot, point of pride in the center of the garage floor. The cars around the perimeter have changed since they were kids playing in here, treating the Impala as their own personal fort—the motorcycle Dean never let Sam try is gone, the old Caddy disappeared, a newish mint-green convertible in its place. Doesn’t much matter. The Council stopped treating this as their personal car stash sometime after Sam turned ten and it became clear that the Winchesters would hold the Wardshep of the bunker indefinitely, and so now it’s just a space for projects, for specific storage needs. The Impala’s the only car that ever really moved, when Sam was growing up. It’s a smooth gleaming bulk, snow and salt caught up in its wheel wells. Dean puts it in park and Sam turns around in time after closing the doors to catch him running his hands slowly along the wheel, his eyes closed.

The call forwarding isn’t hard to set up. Dean plugs in the phone they bought at the Best Buy outside Kansas City and punches in the numbers, fixes it up. Sam dials the deeply private number, hidden even from the phone company, and the phone on the wall chimes for half a second before the spare burner they picked up starts to ring, and, well. That’s done. Dean rubs his thumb over the screen and hits end call, and while he’s still looking down at the little black bullet of the phone he says, “There are a few more wards I should set up. Give me a few hours, okay?”

Like Sam can say no. “Need any help?” he says, and Dean hesitates before he says, “I could actually use a few ampules of blood.”

Curl of revulsion in his gut, like there always is, but—well, like he can say no. “Sure,” he says, casual, and finds himself in the medical room, sitting on the examination bed with his hoodie half-off, the cool air prickling his skin to goosebumps while Dean picks out a sterilized syringe, while he wraps the ancient rubber tubing around Sam’s bicep and tugs it tight. Trainspotting, eat your heart out, Sam thinks, and has to bite his tongue. Dean’s being quiet, his mind obviously miles away, and Sam watches his downturned face rather than where the needle’s slipped almost unobtrusively into his arm, where the blood’s filling up the glass tube for—whatever Dean needs it for. Sam didn’t ask, and he won’t. He can’t wait to get out of here, but those words keep playing on loop every time he opens his mouth and he clenches his teeth shut, instead.

How much did Dean hear? That’s the thing that keeps tying his tongue, filling up his throat like concrete. Dean lets him go after four ampules, tells him to go get something to eat, and Sam’s zipped up warm in his hoodie again, walking the halls, half a sandwich in hand. His stomach’s a rock, but he’s doing what he’s told. For once. Dean’s room, his room. Down the hall a ways, Dad’s, and he opens the door this time, flicks the switch and takes in the sterility. Dad’s guns, his notebooks, his spellwork, gone. Nothing left behind but questions, and a couple of sons who need him. Maybe one who needed him more.

I could give up a kidney, comes a familiar voice into his head, unbidden. He closes his eyes. Closes the door. Time to kill, and not enough for him to do with it. He’s picked their next destination, Boulder’s chapterhouse and a gift of translations for their Second and hopefully something new to be found there, and Dean doesn’t have any objection.

Archive C still has the loose tile in the wall that Sam used to hide an occasional daring fifth when
Bobby Randall would deign to buy one for the weird homeschooled kid. He wonders if Dean ever found it, or if he did what he thought. Sam never was scolded for it. Now all that’s in that empty space is dust. The guest bedrooms sit empty, dull, yellow lamplight and neat desks ready for work. When did the last Practitioner come through, looking to earn his Adept rank? While he was gone? He doesn’t know. Their dad always hated when they were around, though it took Sam a while to learn why: he never liked the idea of someone looking over his shoulder while he worked, no matter if the Practitioners were too low-ranked to ever question him—and, of course, when they were kids Dad always took the opportunity of more adult supervision to disappear for even longer.

In the far west corridor, behind one of the doors that Sam nearly passed by because they were always just empty bland spaces, he finds Dean’s workroom. He crams the last bite of his sandwich in his mouth and flicks the switch, and the room blazes with light, so bright he has to hide his eyes for a blinded second. Way more light than is allotted to most rooms, what looks like repurposed headlights strung up along the ceiling to make it emergency-room brilliant, and worse because of the huge antique mirror hung on one wall. Sam blinks the startled-stung tears out of his eyes, closes the door behind himself. The mirror, enormous, and a big desk on the wall beside it, with a tattoo gun neatly set up on a steel tray. On a shelf on the wall sit book after book of equations, metaphysical math Sam can half-follow, working out how the spells would function when transferred to the flesh. Neat white blotting cloths folded on the desktop, and antiseptic and iodine bottles, and a set of needles, labelled in Dean’s neat capitals: STEEL, and COPPER, and SILVER, and GOLD. Sam picks up the gold needle, a cluster of brilliant heavy points that pricks his finger to bleeding when he touches it. Ow. He sticks his finger in his mouth, sucks, and looks instead at the pots of ink, labelled too with strange runes Sam doesn’t recognize and some words he does: wormwood essence, narcissus extract, bloodroot, devil’s claw. He uncorks one of the small glass bottles and passes it under his nose and it burns, acrid, enough to make him cough.

The chair in front of the mirror is one of the sturdy wooden ones that are all over the bunker, solid and uncomfortable. Working chairs. He sits and looks into the mirror, and imagines: Dean, alone under this penetrating awful light, his hair washed out to dirty blond and his eyes unreadable, watered, while the tattoo gun dumps spellworked ink under his skin and he bleeds, chanting magic alone in the underbelly of this place. Buried alive, the shapeshifter had said, and it had echoed Sam’s thoughts so strongly that a weird known jolt had jumped straight from his hindbrain, metal-taste at the back of his tongue and a queasy tumble in the pit of his stomach.

He touches the center of his chest, where the Key of Solomon sits, still a stark fresh black. Part of this is his fault. He knows that. He left, and it was the best thing for him, it was what he needed to feel like a person and not a cog in some awful story of revenge. And yet: the revenge just came for him, anyway. If he’d never stepped a foot out of the bunker, if he’d stayed put and kept himself safe and immobile as Dean had, what then?

Pointless to speculate. The world’s here, in front of him, and he has to deal with it. At last, he’s getting Dean over to his side. This isn’t going to be their life, not if he has anything to say about it.

Past dinner-time when Dean’s done with putting up whatever additional protections he thinks are necessary. Sam waits and doesn’t say a thing. There’s research to do on the places they’ll likely go. More fights coming. If they have to, they’ll turn up every stone looking for their infuriating goddamn dad. If Sam’s really lucky, when they finally do find Dad Sam’ll get to punch him in the face. A thought to keep him going, beyond the nightmares of flames that still follow him.

Dean appears on the steps up into the war room with two new bags packed, looking a little healthier. “Done,” he says, and then frowns. “What are you doing on my computer?”

“Betsy loves me more, never forget,” Sam says, and gets a sock to the shoulder for it. Back to
normal. They can do this. He tips his head at the monitor, where Colorado’s on the map. “Boulder, right? You know the Second?”

“Obviously,” Dean says, as if offended, and then rolls his eyes when Sam grins at him. “Let’s go, then, if we’re going.”

Sam steals the keys. It’s getting late and Dean’ll drive all night if Sam lets him. There’s something at the back of his mind now that he’s going to try to remember. He owes it to himself, much less his brother. That means Dean’s the one who has to deal with the garage doors, with the gate. It’s a dark night, the moon barely out, and the headlights create a little island of illuminated life while Dean crunches back toward the passenger seat. When he closes the door it shuts out the cold and the Impala’s heater’s working overtime. “Ready?” Sam says, and Dean nods, sliding down in the seat to get comfortable, and Sam presses down the accelerator so the car leaps forward, and leaves the bunker behind.

End Notes

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